

The Fear

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Summary: A crazy Controller.... or new Animorph? It's up to Ax to decide!

The Fear

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CHAPTER 1

"I have seen many strange things on Earth. I have seen humans, that walk on only two legs without a tail to help them balance, and have never seen one lose their balance because of it. Truthfully, I'm not certain which is stranger - the fact that they walk that way, or how well they do."

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-From the Earth Diary of Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill

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I was looking through my diary only a little while ago, when I came upon that entry. It made me think how foolish I had been, then. Humans walk so well on two legs because that was how they evolved. Of course humans would know how to walk on two legs, same as I know how to use my four.

I also laughed, because that was not the strangest thing I have known on Earth. In fact, the strangest I only recently learned of. That strangest thing is our new ally, "Udrak" Sarah.

But I am getting ahead of myself, especially if you do not know of what has happened to me in the past few months. It would be even more confusing for you if you do not know why I walk on four legs.

I walk on four legs because I have them. I have two arms as well, and four eyes. I do because I am an Andalite. As Sarah had never seen a

true Andalite - which is true for most humans - we are about as tall as a full-grown human, with a similar upper body. However, where humans have a waist and their two legs, Andalites have a lower body that faintly resembles a blue horse or deer. Rather than a long tail of hair or a short, furred one, we have a long, powerfully muscled tail that ends in a scythe-like blade; it is similar in structure to the tail of a scorpion. Andalites have more fingers than humans, and where humans tend to be various shades of brown, Andalites are mostly covered in thin blue fur, although that varies in shades as well. Our main eyes are in the same place as human's two eyes, but somewhat larger, and we have two more eyes on stalks at the top of our heads. The last difference is that Andalites have no mouths - we communicate through thought-speak and eat by soaking up nutrients through our hooves; also, rather than a human-like nose, we have three slitted nostrils.

Obviously, I am not like anything native to Earth, in spite of the vast diversity of creatures found here. Which is why it is fortunate that I have the morphing technology that my people invented. With it, I can acquire the DNA of any creature I touch, and become that creature for two Earth hours. Thanks to the help of my human friends, who allowed me to acquire them, I have been able to sample human culture and have come to a very good understanding of it. Well, perhaps not understanding, but I have fooled many humans into thinking I am one of them.

I admit that I do not have many human friends. There is my prince, whose name is Jake; he has dark hair and dark eyes and pale skin. There is his cousin, Rachel, who has yellow hair (humans tend to call this color hair "blond") and blue eyes and skin of a similar shade. She is a very good warrior, unafraid of battle, as I have found myself to be sometimes. Cassie, who has some form of non-family relationship with Jake (something about "more than like, as in, _like_"; sometimes, humans confuse me very much), has darker hair than Jake and Rachel, as well as darker eyes and skin color. She is the darkest of my human friends. Of us all, she has the most natural talent for morphing. Then there is Marco, Prince Jake's friend, who is lighter than Cassie but darker than Jake and Rachel, with dark hair and eyes. He is very funny. At least, that is what I am told. From what I've been able to figure out of the thing humans call "humor", he is sometimes funny, but many times he is not. He is very good at maintaining security - that is, at being able to see where traps may be and at finding places for us to hide.

When in morph, I have seen that my friend Tobias has hair of a browner "blond" than Rachel and a skin tone like hers and Prince Jake's, but normally he has feathers, not hair. You see, Tobias became trapped in the morph of a red-tail hawk soon after gaining the morphing technology from my older brother, Prince Elfangor-Sirinial-Shamkul. Elfangor broke our people's law by giving these five humans the power to morph; unlike my people, who found such a thing unforgivable, I have seen that Elfangor did know what he was doing when he did it. My friends are a powerful force, one that I am proud to fight along side of. Of course, my people would have a hard time accepting this; rather than to risk disgracing Elfangor if his choice proves disastrous, it will be me who will be blamed for the Animorphs' actions should they become... hostile. You see, I have taken the blame for what Elfangor did. The homeworld, if the Council has told them of the Animorphs, believes a scared little aristh named Aximili was frightened and alone and in desperation gave the

morphing power to five humans that happened to discover him because he was careless as well as scared.

If that should happen, it would be embarrassing to see Elfangor as a hero and myself as an idiot, but I am certain it will not come to that. I trust my friends.

Still, the homeworld doesn't know about our new ally. I still don't know exactly what to think about her. On one hand, she has sworn to protect us. On the other, she is... well, she is what we fight. If they did, I would most definitely be in trouble.

Perhaps I should explain.

I live in a large, wooded area that borders on the edge of Cassie's home. Of my human friends, only Cassie has a home that is truly worthy of Andalite standards. She has many acres of open, grassy land, perfect for grazing, and there is a place where a river runs by it, perfect for drinking. However, it would be very foolish for me to live there; for one thing, if I am discovered, I cannot let the Yeerks know that she knows of my existence. I have no doubt that I would be no match for whatever they would do to me, but if I am far from Cassie, then she would have time to run before I betrayed her. At least, that is our hope. My hope. Another is that I cannot allow normal humans to possibly see me, for they might tell a Controller, and I would be captured.

The Yeerks are the enemy we fight. In their natural state, they are anything but terrifying - simple, slimy gray slugs, a few inches long; if you were to step on one, all you might notice was the mess on your artificial hoof - that is, your shoe. All you would probably say would be, "Eww, gross!", or some equivalent.

But the Yeerks are parasites; they are able to enter the ear canal of sentient races, flatten themselves into the crevices of their hosts brains, and control all bodily functions - that is why any host of a Yeerk is called a Controller. The host becomes a slave - complete and absolute. Once, a great Andalites prince named Seerow saw only the helpless slugs, and gave them the power to leave their ugly planet; ever since that mistake, the Andalites have been fighting to contain the Yeerks once more. There is no visible end to this war. Billions have died.

But still, we fight. There is no choice.

I live several miles from Cassie's farm, close to the field where Tobias has his territory. I don't tend to visit Tobias in the early morning and evening, when his hunting is best; otherwise I might frighten away his prey, which would be very inconsiderate of me. That was why I was many miles away one early morning, just after dawn, exploring the woods as I sometimes do when I have nothing better to do. In fact, I was in a small clearing, no more than a hundred feet in every direction, with grass I found to be even sweeter than that I had in my area. I ran, enjoying the taste of it, planning to come there every once in a while, whenever the opportunity came. The grass really was wonderful there; I think it was because the clearing had once been a lake, but had dried out. Fortunately, it had not rained for quite some time; in areas like that, worms are often close to the surface and I sometimes eat them. I do not digest worms very well; they upset my stomach. But that morning I only ate one worm, so I was

happy. I was in a very good mood when I heard the footsteps.

I stopped running, turning my head to listen. My hearts pounded; as my hearing is about equivalent to a human's, I found myself wishing that Tobias, with his superior hawk senses, was with me. Whatever it was, it was running on two legs; obviously it was a human, as only humans run on two legs - all others creatures are better adapted for running, as they run on four legs. They were running, directly toward me.

There was no time to hide. No where to go. I set my legs for the best balance, raising my tail to readiness. A blow to the side of the head with the flat of my tail blade would knock them unconscious with more than enough time for me to get away. They would think I was a dream they had when they lost unconsciousness, not something real that they saw before it happened. I turned a little to my right; I had to meet them head-on, to get to them as quickly as I could. I shifted a little back to my left.

Then I saw her.

She was not much older than my friends, or perhaps their age; she looked older, but I doubted it, because she was not much taller than Marco. Her light brown hair was short but very thick, with waves that almost made it look alive. That is, it looked that way except for where it had been partially burned off on the right side of her head. There, her scalp shown red, and the hair around it was pasted with blood. She was running toward me for all she was worth, with her arms ahead of her to protect her face as she ran. Her face was pointed downward, so she couldn't see me. Her clothing was shredded in many places, and she was bleeding from minor wounds as well as more serious ones; along with the head wound, she had another burn on her left shoulder, one that cut straight through her jacket and shirt into the soft skin and muscle underneath. She was darker than Prince Jake and Rachel but noticeably lighter than Marco in color. I could not see her eyes because they were focused on her feet.

I raised my tail higher, forgetting my plan entirely. I knew those types of burns. I knew what had caused the wounds on her head and shoulder.

Dracon beams.

The Yeerks were after her.

CHAPTER 2

Here! I shouted at the human girl. Come quickly, to the clearing ahead of you!

Her head jerked up at the sound of my thought-speech--just in time to slam, forehead first, into a low-hanging branch. She uttered a small cry as she slipped on a patch of leaves, landing hard on the ground. She moaned, just laying there. "Help us!" she cried weakly. "Andalite, help us, please!"

I jerked in surprise, freezing: Andalite? She knew what I was?

Only one thing came to mind - she had to be a former Controller, one

who had somehow escaped.

Why us? I wondered to myself, hurrying forward, toward the girl. Did she have a companion? She didn't, as far as I could see. I used my stalk eyes to scan around as I approached carefully, trying not to slip on the leaves as well, but I saw no one and heard nothing nearby. There were shouts in the distance, but they were so far back I could not understand what was being said. She had her eyes tightly shut; no doubt, the blow to the head had hurt greatly. What is wrong? I asked her. Have you escaped the Yeerks?

Her eyes flew open; I saw fear in her eyes. "It's too young to be the

Visser!" she hissed, as if to herself. "We're safe! No, I'm safe - you're not."

I took a step back, confused. What?

She turned her unfocused eyes in my direction. She closed her eyes, pressing her palm to her new injury, and winced. "Help us, please," she said. "You have to help us. They know about us - please, they can't take us back. They'll kill her. I'm more worried about you - you only have two days. You're more important. Shut up!" I narrowed my eyes, too confused to do much else; it was as if she was talking to herself, as if she was two people. Her tone changed with each sentence, alternately frightened and urgent. Then a smile slowly grew on her face - no, not a smile, but a grimace - and I saw that one of her teeth was chipped, perhaps from hitting the branch. "Help us," she said again, removing her hand from her head.

What are you? I demanded.

"What do you think, Andalite child?" she retorted. She held her right hand upward. "We're desperate. And we need your help. You have to hide us. Hide her. Shut up! Please, whoever you are, can I have a hand?" I held my hand out, unsure why she wanted it and half afraid of what she would do with it. However, all she did was grasp it tightly and use it to help her stand on her two human feet. "Thank you," she said. "Now, we need to hide. You need to hide - they won't find me. No you don't - you're staying in there. I'm not letting you go that easy - you got us out of there. You saved me again. That's beside the point."

Excuse me, I interrupted. She looked at me blankly; her eyes were a mix of pale brown and green. It was a nice color, but the blankness in them, as if she was looking straight through me to the woods behind me, was chilling. What are you talking about?

"About?" She laughed. "Dear Andalite, I am not talking about anything. It's an old feud with old friends - you'll get used to it for a while, even though it- it won't last long. Shut -" She pressed her hands to her ears and counted out loud to three. Needless to say, I was very confused. There are many human things that confuse me, but this human was especially strange. "We need to hide," she said again. "We'll tell you everything we know, just hide us. She's human, they won't send the Taxxons after her; they think she'll turn up eventually, and that no one would believe her if they are too late to retrieve me - of course, the plan is for it to be too late, but for them never to find her. The only problem is our nature - they're

afraid of him." I thought she meant Visser Three; I was wrong. "If he decides to slither out of her head in front of non-Controllers and expose everything, the others will be in big trouble. That's what they're afraid of. That's why they'll be doing everything short of obvious aliens to get us back within the next twenty-four hours.

That's why we have to hide until then - after that, she can tell you everything. No! We're getting you back before then." She shook her head. "Listen, I understand you're confused, and you have no reason to trust us, Andalite, but if we prove dangerous, go ahead and kill us; it's better than what would happen if we're caught." She regarded me solemnly out of her two nice-colored human eyes. The blankness had faded to a slightly unfocused look in her eyes; most of it was replaced with a pleading, desperate look. "All we ask is that you help us to hide now. Hide us, or kill us - please, you have to. The others will catch up soon. There are too many to take on with just the thr- two of us. Two of us, I won't be much use, I'm afraid. Be quiet. So all you have to do is hide us, somewhere. Or kill us, right here, right now. Just so long as they don't take us back. Please!"

"This way! The trail lead here!"

Her head jerked around; she swayed on her feet, but remained upright. She grabbed my hand. "Hurry!" she cried, fear in her voice. "They're coming for us!" Suddenly, her desperate look changed to a cold glare; the color of her eyes wasn't as nice when she was glaring. "We have to get out of here, Andalite," she said. She reached into her left pocket, cringing as she did so, and pulled out a hand-held Dracon beam. It was different from any Yeerk weapon I had ever seen; the power setting switch went up and down as well as forward and back, and it was smaller than the normal one; it actually fit her hand. Her glare was gone; the desperation had returned. "Man, I really hope this thing still works. No - bring up the bandwidth. That button there. You don't have to tell me - I know, I know, all right? You don't need our mouth to tell me that. Widest bandwidth, got it." She pushed the power setting button downward and forward. "Hope this works again," she said. With that, she pointed it back the way she had come. "Sorry, deer and such," she said. She pulled the trigger.

The weapon did not simply shoot forward in the normal, circular laser beam; instead, it shot forward and to the sides, angling off forty-five degrees in either direction, in a beam no wider than an inch. Rather than a single, straight beam, it encompassed a one hundred and forty degree area. I jumped back, startled. I heard the sound of several things falling as she swept it from ground level to about eight feet off the ground before it made an odd, whining sound, and sputtered, then died. She hissed a human curse. "That'll get rid of the other humans, but I think I might have missed a Hork-Bajir, or maybe both. We just bought you a couple minutes, Andalite - the least you can do is give us a place to hide. In any case, we both have to get out of here - us and you."

What is that?

"This?" She held up the odd Dracon beam. "Oh, a prototype we stole on the way out. Figured we'd add insult to injury - high treason's about as high as you can get, so why not add petty theft to the charge? This is the design for the Dracon beams for humans, so they don't have to keep using the ones designed for Hork-Bajir. Problem's the

stupid charge - only had an eighth battery in it. And that's gone. So we can't pull our stunt again. We need your help, now that we've given you ours."

Help? I echoed. I took another step away, out of range of her human arms and legs. Humans are able to fight with their arms and legs, but not much else. Also, I didn't know if the Dracon beam was truly drained. Help a _Controller?_ I laughed, and hoped I sounded much more brave and certain than I was feeling. You can't be serious.

"Oh, we are very serious, Andalite," she snapped. "Because we are not a Controller. Udrak is too much of a softy to make us a Controller. Be quiet, Sarah." Her voice changed as she said that; the first two sentences were angry. The third was a tone Marco often uses, to make a joke. The last was not harsh, but firm, like a prince talking to a warrior.

Oh, really? Then what are you?

I will never forget what she said. Never. Something with no answer.

"We are one," she replied.

CHAPTER 3

"We are one."

There was nothing I could think of to say to that. That is, except to echo blankly, One?

"We are Udrak Casey Eight-Eight-Eight Sarah of the Rel Driak pool. Is that specific enough for you?" The tone was explanatory at first, but the second part was definitely sarcastic. I have become very good at recognizing sarcasm. "There is no separation anymore. He's been in my head for almost seven years now. He has always been kind to me, because he doesn't have the heart to break me. He's really kind of sweet if you like sarcasm." Then the tone of her voice turned less like that of a girl and more of someone who is very much afraid.

"She's all that matters, Andalite. Seerow's only mistake was trusting in the wrong people. It wasn't his fault, really - he meant well. We just wanted what he showed us, not to be told and not have. What cruelty, to know and yet not have.... Please - save her. If not for me, wouldn't you save her?" Again, the tone changed, to angry.

"Shut up, Udrak! And stay in there! You are not bailing out, you hear me? We're sticking together, just as we always have! Just shut up. We'll get out of this." It was disturbing to listen to it - I could see now that, somehow, the Yeerk did not have complete control of its host. It almost seemed... cooperative. But why? She looked at me again, eyes focusing - at least, as much as they did; she still had a somewhat... distracted... look to her expression - and smiled sadly. "Confused, friend?" She chuckled. "You don't know the half of it. We'd be glad to explain, only she's hurt and bleeding, he's planning on bailing because he wants you to help me even if it means getting captured himself and she simply won't let me. So are you going to help, or stand there, or what?"

Ax-man? Oh, man, what's going on? Who's that?

Tobias! He must have caught himself breakfast and came looking for me. I looked upward with three eyes, trying to spot him. I kept one of my stalk eyes on the girl to make sure she didn't try to attack me. Tobias, there is a problem.

You gotta move, man. There's a bunch of humans heading your way. They're drunk, or something - either stumbling or dazed, but they look like they're recovering. What happened? Oh, jeez - there's animals all over the place! They're all just lying there on the ground. This isn't good.

"Is one of your allies here?" she asked me. I focused on her with my main eyes, but continued to scan the skies for Tobias with my stalk eyes. There he was - a small-looking brown blur in the skies. "Tell them. Ask them what to do, aristh. You can't be old enough to be a warrior yet. Ask the warrior what to do about us. But hurry! - there isn't time. Tell them that there are a bunch of Controllers out there, heading this way."

Those are Controllers, Tobias, I answered him. This girl seems to be one too, except - it is difficult to explain. The Yeerk does not have complete control; perhaps it is dying, I don't know. But both are speaking at once. Are there any Hork-Bajir?

None I see. Wait! Yes, two. I didn't see one because they're face-down in a ditch. The other's in a tree - I think it's listening for something.

I noted that she had been truthful in saying there were two Hork-Bajir. This stranger keeps asking me to hide her. I don't know what to do. She acts very strangely. She talks to herself a lot. She says she'll tell us all she knows if I hide her - or to kill her so that they do not take her alive. Not knowing what else to say, I finished by repeating, I don't know what to do.

What do we lose if we hide her? I was surprised by how quickly he answered. So long as we keep her away from our territories, I mean. Take her deeper into the woods, Ax. I'm here to guide you. The humans look worn out - all you have to worry about is the Hork-Bajir, I think. You should be able to get away.

She can't run faster than a Hork-Bajir, I said. The human- Controller - or whatever she was - looked at me oddly; I had said that so she could hear. She is injured.

"You're not, are you?" she demanded.

You cannot run as fast as I can, I pointed out.

The side of her mouth quirked up. "Maybe not," she admitted. "Do you trust me?"

I simply stared.

"Didn't think so," she said. "Still, at least the warrior has some sense." With that, she came closer; I refused to move. She put her right hand on my shoulder, the left on my rump. "Put the tail down, please," she told me in a patient, slightly condescending voice.

Why should I? I demanded. What are you doing?

"Isn't it obvious? I'm breaking your back, and I don't want to lose any more hair doing it. My head's killing me enough as it is, so stop shouting, okay? Now lower it, just a little, would you? Please?"

Breaking my back? How could she do that? Humans have very strong arms, but not that strong. Muscles straining with readiness in case she should try anything, stalk eyes equally straining to catch the slightest movement she made, I lowered my tail slightly.

It was then I remembered that Cassie was able to mount the backs of her horses by placing one hand on their shoulder, the other on their rump, and, by stepping into a stirrup, boosting herself up. My back wasn't nearly as high as a horse's, and didn't require a stirrup. The girl pushed, placing her weight on her arms, and swallowed a cry at the pain she had to feel in her injured shoulder. Awkwardly, she swung her left leg over the other side, scooted farther up, and wrapped her arms around my chest, grasping her wrists with the opposite hands. "Now we can," she said. "Sorry if this bothers you, but now you face getting captured as well. So run."

I didn't know what to do; she was rather heavy, and put a lot of weight to my forward legs. It didn't really hurt, but it did make me awkward. Still, I didn't have much of a choice. Even if I reared up, human arms are very strong - I doubted she would fall off with her arms locked together by her strong human hands. So I took a couple steps to get the feel of balancing with her weight on my back, and ran.

Ax? Whose idea was that?

Hers. I did not know what she wanted until it was too late. I do not think I can throw her off. Her arms are wrapped around me.

I can see that, Ax. I can see each vein in every one of the leaves stuck to her head wound. That is one nasty burn - must hurt like crazy. She doesn't look like much of a rider, though - not nearly as good as Cassie or Rachel is. If we have to ditch her, I'll just fly at her face. Trust me - humans protect their faces with their hands. I remembered that from when she had been running toward me. She'll fall off if you stand on your hind legs then.

It was very strange, running with the human on my back. Not really all that uncomfortable in the literal sense of the word, justâ€¦ strange. She hugged me tightly, with both her arms and her legs; her arms were still wrapped around my body at chest-level, while her legs squeezed my lower mid-section to keep her from slipping. My back slopes a lot, so I don't blame her for hanging on tightly, but her closeness made me uncomfortable in a way I cannot explain. I ran, farther into the woods, hoping to find someplace to put her. Go get the others, Tobias, I told him. We need to figure out what to do with her once she is safe. I will guard her.

Right, Ax. Be back as soon as I can.

As I ran, I hoped "soon" would be very, very soon.

I ran about a mile and a half with her on my back before her grip slipped and she fell. It had been loosening every once in a while, only to tighten even more, but this time she slid completely off. She cried out as she hit the ground. "Impudent filth!" she shouted at me as I slowed to a stop. Then she shook her head. "No, that was my fault," she told herself, her voice low. "I couldn't hang on anymore. My shoulder hurts too bad."

I approached warily; she looked up at me again, but didn't raise her hand to ask to be lifted back up. I offered my hand anyway; she merely shook her head. "No, Andalite, no further assistance today," she said tiredly. "Except maybe medical." She craned her neck to look at her shoulder, touched it gingerly with her right fingertips, and cringed, gasping. "Oh, that's going to leave a scar. If what I got on my head is this bad... well, maybe I should worry more about the hair growing back than what I lost of it." Then she sighed, closing her eyes. "Thanks, Udrak. And thank you, Andalite." She reopened her eyes, and cocked her head to the side a little. "You have a name? Something we can call you besides 'Andalite'? It'd be kind of silly to call you that when the others arrive. After all, they wouldn't make you watch over me for a day or so without attention to my wounds - would they?" There was a touch of fear in the last two words. Then her voice turned malicious. "I mean, she is too valuable to you Andalites alive - you wouldn't let her die of maltreatment, would you? I know some of you are ruthless enough to, but that can't be the way, now. Not after Aftran's promise."

You know of that? I felt my hearts stop beating. Aftran was the name of a Yeerk Cassie had made a truce with; Cassie trapped herself in a caterpillar morph, and in return Aftran let the girl she controlled go. Fortunately, Cassie was saved by the fact that the caterpillar cocooned itself, and, through natural morphing, turned into a butterfly and in that way renewed her time limit, so that she was able to escape. She later learned that Aftran had kept her promise, too - in fact, Aftran started organizing other Yeerk sympathizers together. She was caught, but Cassie managed to save her. Using our Escafil Device, we allowed her to become a nothlit - a creature trapped in morph - in the form of her choice, so that she would not starve of lack of Kandrona rays. As she chose a whale, I am certain we shall never see her again.

It was not an end I agreed with. After all, a Yeerk is a Yeerk. They are the enemy. I did not argue, however; it was my prince's idea to allow Aftran to do that. It is not an aristh's place to argue with his prince.

"Aftran is a friend of ours," she said. Her tone became angry, accusing. "At least, she was until you 'heroes' took her to starve to death." She set her jaw, then began pulling debris from her shoulder wound, hissing softly each time. When it was cleaned to her satisfaction she turned back to me. The anger was gone from her voice. "She was more fearful of being caught, though - too afraid to do as I do. I told her she was a fool. I suppose she wasn't, considering I was caught." She chuckled humorlessly. "Dear Aftran did know what she was squeaking about, didn't she?" Then her tone changed again, to a strange mix of condolences and chidings. "You did what was right, Ude. That's what matters." She shook her head, then, and the voice was a strange mix of the two creatures I was beginning to see this girl as - the patient but harshly bitter tone of the strange Yeerk, and the determined one of the human who didn't want to

lose him. That fact turned my blood cold. Bad enough to save a Controller - but a voluntary one? I forced myself to remain calm, not to be blinded by my disgust. A crawling sensation made my entire back itch, where she had ridden me. "We still don't know your name, Andalite."

My name is Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill.

"Elfangor was your brother, no?" She smiled faintly, but her voice was harsh with sarcasm. "Yes, I see a bit of resemblance in the eyes. The hate, the disgust. Yes, he would be proud to know you follow in his footsteps, protecting the humans from the Yeerk plague. Stop it, Udrak!" The last statement was a snarl. Then she sighed heavily, and began to gingerly feel her head wound for the debris that had fallen in it, and remove the leaves and such as best she could without seeing them. Her voice turned apologetic. "I am sorry, Andalite. Yeerks have their propaganda, same as you. Of course, the best propaganda is your own, you know. What better way to hate the enemy than to see how much they hate you?" I didn't know what to say to that. "Ude wasn't tricked by it." Her voice changed then; became harsher, more stern, and slightly sarcastic. "At least, I like to think I wasn't. I was... recruited. Only they used the word 'requested'. But when the Council requests the slightest thing...." She shuddered. "They made public spectacles of those that refused, made them look like traitors by showing the propaganda right after the executions. But all they did was...was... I... I didn't fall for it." A look of hatred crossed her face; her eyes looked almost orange in that look. It sent shivers down my spine. "Most of those 'traitors' were my friends - my family. They didn't know of course - why should they care? Oh, who would mourn a bunch of traitors, of Andalite sympathists, of... of... of anti-expansionists. Oh, how they made that word a curse." I looked up, hoping to spot my friends flying to help me, but there was nothing. This Yeerk was making me very uncomfortable. I didn't like the hate-sound in their voice, even if it was directed at my enemies. She regarded me again, as if reading my thoughts. "Do you know how hard it is to hate your own kind, Mr. Isthill?" she asked me.

I thought of my own conception of my people; a race with every right to be proud of our accomplishments, but still capable of making mistakes, of letting our pride get in the way of our judgement. No. Not hate. Disagree with, perhaps, but not hate.

"You're very lucky then. It's like swallowing - or, in your case, absorbing - broken glass." I didn't tell her that I had experience with mouths, and swallowing. "It's like dying inside, to hate what you are." She looked away, then returned her gaze. The hate was gone, to be replaced by a drained expression. "Udrak doesn't want to hurt anyone," the girl said. "He never did. But he was too afraid to face the consequences of telling anyone. So he went along with it - and hated every moment of it. He hated every Yeerk in the entire galaxy. He hated the Andalites, yes, but he hated his own people more - Seerow had been right to help."

Then her voice changed again, to the bitter sarcasm of the Yeerk. "But the Yeerks he gave the technology to wanted more. They wanted to travel the stars, to find better hosts than the simple Gedds. And what was wrong with Gedds? Nothing. But Andalites looked so much more... impressive. The thought of inhabiting such a creature as that... nothing else mattered. If Seerow had just kept to himself,

or given his 'gifts' to a small pool, of hostless Yeerks - they might have escaped the Council forever, started a small colony of Yeerks with voluntary, partial-Controllers somewhere. Did you know that Yeerks are able to infest comatose hosts?" The bitter sarcasm eased out of her voice, draining it of everything but defeat. "We can live their lives for them, if there isn't any life left anymore; sometimes we can even revive them, find what corner they've locked themselves into. All we - all I wanted was a chance to see, to hold, to walk. My friends and I - we would agree to share an equal bond with our hosts, just for that chance. That one, small chance...." She lifted her head, turning it slightly to the side. "Someone's coming!" she hissed.

I listened; yes, there were footsteps. Many footsteps.

Ax! We're back. Sorry it took so long; the others had to make a pit stop to remorph - it took too long. They've remorphed now, because we don't know how long we have to be here. One hour, fifty-eight minutes to go. I watched as Tobias landed on a branch close by. He turned his hawk's glare on the girl. Who are you? he demanded sharply. And don't give me any crap. I want your real name.

She smiled. I think she was amused by Tobias' impolite tone, but I had no idea why. There was discomfort in her expression, too; I believe it was because she had not seen Tobias, and did not know where the voice was coming from. "Which one of us?" she asked. "We have two real names. Well - we did, at least. We are Udrak Casey Eight-Eight-Eight Sarah of the Rel Driak pool."

Yeah, right, Udrak Eight-Eight-Eight of the Rel Driak pool. 'Casey-Sarah' doesn't exist.

"Oh, but she does," the Controller replied patiently. "Udrak isn't what you think," she continued, in what I recognized as the girl's tone, not Udrak's. "He isn't a slaver. He's... well, he's different. I'm not fully a Controller."

Not fully a Controller? a skeptical voice echoed. Really. I focused my gaze on Marco, leaning against a tree with his arms crossed over his chest and looking as human as a large gorilla can, in such a condition. His heavy, muzzled face did not look the slightest bit convinced. The tree creaked when he leaned against it.

She had been sitting down with her legs stretched out in front of her; at the sound of Marco's thought-speak and the creaking tree, she rolled over, tucking her legs in, so that she was kneeling. Once she was facing the ground she pushed herself slightly backwards so that she was in a crouch. All this took less than a second; she had very quick reflexes. In one second, she had gone from a restful position to one in which she could easily move from harm's way. "What do you want?" she snapped, before her eyes widened, and she sighed. "We're no use to you if you give me a fatal heart attack, Andalite," she told him, turning up one side of her face in an odd half-smile.

Those of us who have come have chosen to speak to you in Earth morphs, Marco continued. Our scout wasn't sure if you were a Controller or not, so we chose to use morphs we acquired from certain local specimens that you would have no trouble understanding can kill you very easily.

"Why don't you want us to see what you look like? Andalites can kill us just as easily as overgrown chimps can. It'd be a lot cleaner that way, too."

Marco was caught off-guard for a moment, but only a moment. I don't think she caught it. If Visser Three knows who we are, we could be in danger. You might have been able to identify us.

She stared at him - just stared. Then she shrugged her right shoulder. "Whatever. You Andalites are weird anyway." I glared at her, but she wasn't looking at me. I thought I saw the corner of Marco's mouth twitch, as if he wanted to laugh at the comment but didn't dare. "As I've told two of you already, we are two creatures - Udrak Eight-Eight-Eight of the Rel Driak pool, and Casey-Sarah - but the differential between the two is blurred; we often agree and speak as one. Humans usually call us Kelly. I'd appreciate if you called us Udrak or Sarah - depending on who you want to answer."

Do you think we would trust you to let her answer? Marco snapped.

"No," she answered in a calm, dangerous voice. "No, you Andalites-_Udrak_!" The voice was now drained, as if she was more interested in going to sleep than anything else. "Let me handle this, okay? You're worn out. You're hungry. I know you're hurting more than I am. Relax - I can do this. They won't listen to you anyway." Marco appeared to be as disturbed by her speaking to herself as I was, but it was more difficult to tell his expression from the gorilla's heavy face. "There's only one way they'll believe I'm not you. No! It's too dangerous. They might hurt you. They can't hurt _you_. Don't make me force my way out, Sarah. It's too dangerous! I won't let them hurt you because of me. Not after all this time, when they... when they are hope for you." She stopped speaking then, just stared straight ahead, with a strange expression, like a mixture of surprise and fear.

Oh, so you're willing to put yourself in danger for your host? Marco sneered. That's rich. Then he directed his thought-speech to me. Ax, buddy, you know we love you, man, but... what, exactly, were you thinking? This is ridiculous.

I waited for a Udrak to make a reply to Marco's taunt, but - nothing. I looked at the expression more closely, and was surprised to see that it hadn't changed at all. She just stared, straight ahead, as if looking at something so frightening and impossible it had rendered her immobile.

Why were you running from the others? Tobias demanded, but he, too, received no answer. Udrak! Still, nothing.

There was a rustling in the bushes slightly to Marco's left, and Cassie peered out from underneath it. At least, I hoped the wolf's muzzle belonged to Cassie. There you are! I heard her say. She slunk out from beneath the bush. Over here. At that, Prince Jake and Rachel appeared, from either side of the bush. Prince Jake looked impressive in his tiger morph, like living liquid metal encased in orange-and-black fur. Rachel was more impressive simply in size and power, in her grizzly bear morph. Have you found out anything? Prince Jake asked me. Cassie crept closer to the girl, her eyes fastened on

her wounds, but she waited to see what Prince Jake would say. Still, I knew that she wanted to help. That is part of who Cassie is.

I do not know, my prince, I answered him, avoiding using his name. For once, he did not tell me not to call him "prince"; I guessed he realized that I was letting the girl hear me. This creature confuses me. At times it seems to be a Yeerk talking, at others it is very convincing in sounding as if the human child has some control. Sometimes, it is almost as if both are speaking with one voice. She has referred to herself as 'we' many times.

He looked at Tobias. Is this true?

Yeah, Tobias replied, keeping his reply from the girl. It's creepy listening to it. Then a moment ago she just froze up. Suddenly he jerked as if he'd been hit, and spread his wings in a fear reaction. Oh! Oh! Look! he cried out. _Look_!

The others focused their singular pairs of eyes on the girl; I focused all four of mine on her, startled by Tobias' panic. I saw that she had moved her right hand, cupping it around her ear.

Oh my God.... Cassie whispered to no one in particular.

CHAPTER 5

As we watched, a small, gray-colored thing began to slip from her ear. It began as nothing more than a thin tendril, but then it felt her palm, and all at once the Yeerk slipped out of her ear.

The Yeerk.

All Yeerks look alike. They are small, gray slugs. This one was no different - it just lay in her cupped palm, an unmoving, four-inch-long worm.

Suddenly the girl blinked twice, then jerked her head to the side to look at the little slug. "You little _idiot_!" she hissed. She fell backwards, sitting once more, and moved her hand to her lap as if she were afraid that she was going to drop the Yeerk and he would disappear. She nudged the thing with a finger on her other hand.

"After all we've been through, you abandon me _now_?" She looked up, her eyes telling of her fear and unease. It was the look of a real child. It was as obvious as the slug lying on her palm. Then her jaw tightened shut, and her frightened eyes narrowed; she was frightened, yes. But not paralyzed by it, not rendered harmless. That much was obvious. It was the look of a born warrior, or at least someone familiar with the role. It was a look I recognized as being one Rachel often wore.

Marco took three steps closer, using his large fists to balance himself.

A look of anger crossed her already cold face, and she tore the Dracon beam from her pocket with her empty hand and raised the hand with the Yeerk to her chest, shielding it with her hand. "Leave him alone!" she shouted. "He's kept me safe all these years, so don't you jerks think for one minute that I won't do the same for him!" (She didn't use the word "jerks"; the word she actually used, I'm told, is very inappropriate, and that "jerks" is a functional and polite

substitution.) Her hand shook; she knew as well as I did that she was bluffing. However, I think the shaking was due more to the fact that, holding the Dracon beam as she was, she was wrinkling her shoulder wound, which had to hurt her terribly. Admirably, however, the minor vibration of her arm was all that told of it; her eyes did not even tear, as humans' eyes will do when faced with great pain.

I wasn't going to do anything, Marco said, but I knew he was lying - he was probably going to take the Yeerk and squash it. I wouldn't have blamed him.

There is no charge in that Dracon beam, I told him privately. At least, I do not believe so.

Just hand over the Dracon beam, he said. He held out his hand.

Her eyes narrowed even farther. "I have a better idea. It's useless, anyway - dead." With that, she threw it backward over her head and mine, into the woods. "There. Now I doubt any of us have weapons except that I am very, very desperate and you're not. So just stay away from me." I saw Tobias flap away, either to scout the area or find the Dracon beam. I felt the first one to be more likely. "Just stay away from me - and if you say one thing - _one thing_ - against Udrak, you can forget any help from me. No timetables, no names of local Controllers, nada." I refrained from asking anyone what "nada" meant. I felt that it couldn't be any better than losing the possibility of receiving the other two pieces of information. "He's all I had for seven years. The only one I could trust. He still is. He did this so _you_ wouldn't hurt _me_. Don't make him look like a fool."

Seven years? Cassie echoed. You've been a Controller for _seven_ _years_?

"I was one of the first - at least, of the first scouts. No, not me." She shook her head. "I'm sorry. Udrak's been so... so open, so... so candid with me. It's hard to tell us apart, sometimes. He was a minor, rankless slug under the first scouts. He had a Gedd body, and was in charge of two Hork-Bajir-Controllers. At the time, I- I-" She laughed. "Actually, I was a little kid who was scared stiff of monsters in my closet, very glad to have left them behind when I went to camp. I was at Girl Scout camp at the time. It was, like, one o'clock in the morning or something, and I woke up and had to go. You know? Maybe you don't, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that I left without my flashlight like the idiot kid I was and got hopelessly lost. And, being hopelessly lost, I happened to stumble on a Gedd and a pair of Hork-Bajir at the lake for some reason. Udrak told me later that they'd been sent to retrieve some debris or something - some evidence of some sort - from the bottom of the lake. Something that'd been left behind. The Hork- Bajir-Controllers wanted to kill me - I was a security risk. But Udrak wouldn't let them. He pointed out that I might be of some use. I didn't know this at the time - I was scared out of my mind, captured by some giant, ugly dinosaurs who spoke partial English and a semi-monkiesh monster who patted me on the head, held my hand, and seemed to be doing everything in its power to make sure I wasn't scared. The Sub-Visser over Udrak thought it would be a great punishment for him to be put into me because he'd been soft, but he was very kind. The first thing he did was look into my memory. Yeerks have to do that, you see. They do that as much as you or I breathe. Like breathing, they have some

control over it, but they have to do it. But- it wasn't just that. I don't know if any of you have ever had a Yeerk in your head - I serious doubt it - but most Controllers, all they get is crushed into a dark corner of their mind with nothing but Yeerk tauntings and emotions for company. Me, I got the emotions, yeah - but I also got this gentle voice, saying, 'It'll be all right. I'm not going to hurt you. You remember that monkey, Sarah? That was me. I want to help you. You must trust me.' I didn't really have a choice - Udrak had me as a Controller at the time. But when I was sent back to the camp - just the next morning, about a mile away, so that I would just say I had gotten lost - he... he let go. He sat me down in an out-of-the-way place and said, 'I know you, but you don't know me. That isn't fair.' You got to understand, I was pretty little then, very immature by human standards, and scared witless. In my mind, I was sobbing, I was hopeless. Then... then he opened up to me. He had opened my memory - and then, right then, he showed me his. He showed me his friends being executed. He showed me what it was to be in a Yeerk pool, blind and barely aware. Yeerks aren't sociable creatures like humans and Andalites - they don't talk much to each other, because there isn't much to say, you know? 'Hi, how are you, how long you been, found anything to control lately? No? Me, I've never inhabited anything. Bye.' That's the extent of their lives. It's so lonely. Yeerks are almost quaintly primitive in their natural forms, except for their inner thoughts, their language. There, they are... unimaginable. They are so complicated, so wonderful...." She sighed, then chuckled. "At least, Udrak seemed that way to me at the time. By now I've come to realize that he's less than wonderful sometimes. But we have an arrangement - I keep him in me, he keeps me safe."

That's ridiculous, Rachel snapped. I can't believe we're listening to this! She's obviously a voluntary host. A traitor to the human race. She doesn't need to have a Yeerk in her head to lie.

"I beg your pardon?" The girl's eyes narrowed into slits, and she stared around at the others; it is impossible to tell where thought-speak comes from unless you already know who is talking. The blankness in her expression, the distraction, was gone; now they had a focus that rivaled that of Tobias. "I'm sorry, but I think I just heard one of you call me a liar." Her glare turned on Rachel, who returned it easily. I suppose some things can be told without prior knowledge; that glare gave away who had spoken. "I am not a liar."

You could be lying about that, Marco said.

She glared at him for a moment, then laughed. "You're right about that," she said at last. "I sure could. But what fun would that be?" No one answered her. "Now listen. I only have one thing to ask you. Udrak has made it clear that he wants me safe. He wants me to stay with you. I told him that's insane - what would you want with some idiot human girl immediately recognizable by human-Controllers for miles around? - but he isn't backing down in this, not this time. He's... he's letting me go." She sounded hurt. Could it be she actually liked being a Controller? "Our problem is that we made a mistake. It's been hard, hiding that he doesn't fully control me - he doesn't really control me at all, in most ways. But, while we were at the pool this morning, one of the Hork-Bajir attendants scratched me. I snapped at him. That wouldn't have been so bad, but that Udrak was in my head and I said, well, let's just say it was very much

human. It was very obvious that Udrak was not doing his job properly. I couldn't let them hurt him because I was stupid, so... well, I ran."

What did you mean before, when you said you were 'one'? I asked her. Does it have to do with the way the Yeerk does not fully control you?

You're _one_? Cassie echoed.

One _what_? Rachel demanded.

The girl shook her head. "Udrak is a traitor to parasites everywhere. He doesn't live as a parasite. He's not a predator, either - not like humans are, that eat other animals to live. He's... he and me... we're different, now, different from other Controllers. He and I - we're one in the same now. We have been for many years." She smiled vaguely, as if thinking of something only she understood. "I let him see. All he wants is to be able to see colors, to know what each thing he feels and smells looks like. He wants to see the world from above the mud. All he wants is a way to live. Me, I'm afraid. All the time. But Udrak - he keeps me safe. When it's me and Controllers, when I don't know what to do, Udrak takes control. He keeps us out of trouble. I give him a chance to live; he gives me a chance to live. Two different meanings to 'live', but that's pretty much how it works. I decide what to look at; he doesn't care, so long as he can look, too, and tell me something of the wonder and beauty of a normal, everyday sight that I would never have known if it weren't for him. I move us wherever we go, because all he wants is to see it all, to witness everything, and to... to have someone to share it with. Udrak has lost everything." She shifted uncomfortably, but her smile did not die. "He just wanted someone to share with. All he wants is someone to understand. That's all I wanted, too. I... well, I was spacey when I was little. One of those kids who sit in a corner, too scared to talk to anyone. I was lonely to the point where I didn't want to make friends." I did not understand what she meant by that, but no one else spoke, so I did not either. "I was a Girl Scout because my mom wanted me to be out with other girls my age, not because I wanted to be. All I wanted was a corner where everyone would ignore me. Then - then there was Udrak. He was lonely too, and scared. He was just like me, but that his penalty was death. Mine was just... well, being a lonely little kid who wouldn't talk."

Is there a point to this? Rachel demanded. Marco looked just as annoyed. Prince Jake's tiger face looked thoughtful, and Cassie seemed... well, it is hard to tell expression on a wolf's face, but from my experience with her I guessed that she might be sympathetic.

"Yes, there is, which you would notice if you didn't keep interrupting," the girl snapped. (I am sorry if I must call her that, but her concept of her names confused me, so I did not have anything better to use at the time.) "My point is, that Udrak _isn't_ a parasite. I'm _not_ a Controller. I can't think of the word for it, but... he doesn't hurt me. We help each other. We're all the other can trust."

Symbiosis? Was that what she meant? That neither harmed the other? It was, as Rachel had said, ridiculous. To some degree, Gedds and Yeerks had once had a symbiotic relationship - Yeerks provided intelligence

against predators while Gedds provided transport from one pool to another, or something of that nature.

"Yes!" I almost cringed; I hadn't realized I had said it aloud. "Yes, that is it. He's not a parasite. At least, he doesn't act like one. Udrak is more of a symbiote. Kind of like an imaginary friend. A voice in my head. Sometimes, a guardian angel. But never - never - once - has he hurt me. I can't say the same, I know. I know that you know not all Yeerks are evil." The others were silent, so I was as well. "You remember Aftran, no doubt." I saw Cassie stiffen at that; the girl did, too. "Were you the one who made the deal with her?" she asked Cassie, her eyes narrowing. Then she chuckled. "Trust you Andalites to get out of stuff like that. No wonder Udrak wants you to baby-sit me for the rest of my life." Her expression became more serious. "Whatever did you do to her?"

What were you going to say about Aftran? Cassie asked, her voice toneless, giving away nothing.

"She was a friend of ours," the girl replied. "She was too frightened of the Council to even attempt symbiotic relations with her hosts. Not even with that little girl." She shook her head. "That poor girl. I wonder if she understands anything that's happened to her. If she's lucky, she doesn't, and will eventually forget. May whatever god - or gods - she prays to at night give her the blessing to forget. Of all Controllers, there are none luckier than I."

I thought you said you weren't a Controller, Prince Jake pointed out.

"What else could I be?" she asked him bluntly. "Anybody with a Yeerk in their head is a Controller, right? But I'm not a full-Controller. Only partial."

And voluntary, Marco said.

"Not originally," she admitted, "but now, yeah. You would be, too, if you could find a Yeerk not brainwashed by the propaganda of the Council of Thirteen and dead scared of going against them. Sure, there's plenty of those that get a kick out of this whole power business. It's the insane power-mongers that become officers. It's us who are more scared of the Council than you that end up dead. You've all been brainwashed by your stupid government into this, same as most Yeerks were by my even worse one. True, it isn't all about propaganda - it's all about Power, Politics, and then Propaganda. The Three P's of War. Killing off the extra populations. Letting the fat old bureaucrats breed their in-bred offspring in the safety of the homeworld while everybody else goes and gets themselves killed at their whim. The universe is a wonderful place, isn't it? Wouldn't want to live

there, but I hear it's hell to visit. We- I hate bureaucracy."

That sounds like something I'd say, Marco muttered to the rest of us.

What do we do, Jake? Cassie asked. We can't just leave her there. Those wounds need looking at.

We can't let her know who we are, Marco said. We can't demorph. She's

a voluntary traitor. I mean, a symbiotic Yeerk? Yeah.

Uh-huh. _Surrrre_.

Don't say it, Cassie, Rachel said quickly. How do we know she's

telling the truth about Aftran? For all we know, that Yeerk is the one that turned her over to Visser Three, and Karen Whats-her-name is a Controller again. The Yeerk she's hugging could have taken that fancy human-design Dracon beam and handed Aftran over personally!

Ax, Prince Jake said, morph to human. You may look partially like all of us, but not like any in particular in your normal human morph. Help clean out her wounds. We can bring bandages later. He sort of sighed then, in thought-speak; it isn't the same as an actual, physical sigh, more of a feeling in your mind than an actual sound or movement. I began to do as he told me to. We can deal with the human once the Yeerk is dead. Without the Yeerk, it'll be more clear what to do with her. At least, I hope so. Then, to the girl, he said, Aximili will be morphing to human, to help you with your injuries as best he can until we can provide other things for you. You are to stay with him until some of us return.

"Don't play with me like I'm one of the dumber Hork-Bajir," the girl interrupted him. "No way you'd send four warriors to check out a stupid human-Controller. Not even a warrior and a bunch of _arisths_. There's way too many of you for something as little as us. That's all you are, aren't you? Your plans always seemed kind of... improvised. I'm willing to bet you're all there is. I'm also willing to bet there isn't one prince among you. It isn't like you'd tell me. But I'm wagering you're lucky if half of you are warriors. So don't give me crap about 'some'. And thank you for letting him help me, but get one thing clear." Her eyes narrowed. "Udrak isn't dying, got that? I won't allow it. I'd die first before letting that happen." She turned her glare on Marco. "You made a snide remark about Udrak putting his host before him. That just goes to show how little you know, Andalite. It's narrow-minded jerks like you that have given you the nickname 'filth'. Only the _othyb_ have a worse name than you in the Yeerk language. And I don't need proof that you deserve it. I agree to cooperate for tonight. Tonight, got that? Morning, I'm out of here. You'll have to kill me before I let anything stop me. Udrak's saved me too many times for me to just let him die now. Especially from lack of Kandrona rays. Would you let your families starve to death? Well, I'm not letting that happen to me. Or Udrak."

"We will have to see, won't we?" I asked, fully human. She twisted her head around at an uncomfortable-looking angle at the sound of my voice. "Please stay still." She turned her eyes back to the others. I began peeling what was left in her head wound out of it. It didn't appear to be too serious of a wound; it was only bleeding from a small spot near the center of her head. It was just that the heat of the Dracon beam had burned a section of the skin off, as well as a good deal of her hair. She hissed a little when I came too close to where it was bleeding.

"You want my cooperation, Andalites?" she said, sounding braver than she probably was. "Fine. But if Udrak is harmed in any way, deal's off. If you won't kill me, then—" She sort of choked then. She looked

down at the vile slug that rested in her palm, so that I couldn't clean her wound.

"Then I guess I'll just have to do it myself."

CHAPTER 6

Tobias

Ax wasn't there when the rest of us headed back. The others morphed back to bird morphs once we were far away from Udrak, Sarah, and Ax; I kept a lookout. That is, after I gave the Dracon beam to Rachel. It was a lot lighter than the Dracon beam I'd taken out the Truck ship with (it's a long story I can tell some other time), but bulky; flying with it was awkward. Once the two hours were up, we were only a couple miles from Cassie's farm, and there was a lot to discuss, so the others chose to walk.

I started the conversation. This is just too weird. It seemed as good a start as any. A Yeerk who shares fifty-fifty with its Controller? Does that sit any better with any of you?

"It's a trick," Rachel said. She was testing out the feel of the prototype Dracon beam, gripping the handle and weighing the weapon in her hand. "I mean, come on! It's ridiculous. A Yeerk does not share. Yeerks take. They take and gloat about it. They do not give."

"Aftran gave," Cassie interrupted her. "Aftran nearly gave her life so Karen could go free. I think Jake is right." She shuddered at what she said. I understood why. "There's no way we can keep the Yeerk alive. She's not like the Chee - she's human. She can't keep him alive by making Kandrona rays or save herself by changing a hologram around her. And we don't know enough about Udrak to trust him as we did Aftran."

"Not that the Chee are perfect or anything," Marco said. "I'm sticking with Rachel. This is just too bogus. The only way -"

"Only way what?" Cassie asked, turning on him and grabbing his arms. She gave him a little shake. "What's the only way?"

He shook his head. "It's insane. But... the only way to know is make one of us a Controller. Put Udrak into one of our heads. And keep Sarah far away, in case Udrak tries to squeal. But - no way. It's out of the question."

"But it would work!" Cassie cried. "I volunteer. Generally, I have the weakest morphs. I knew Aftran. Udrak would trust me, and I know what to look for."

"But how would we know it's you?" Rachel pointed out. "We wouldn't. It's a trap, it has to be. Sarah's just a human Controller. She talked about power-maniacs? Put her on the top of the list. If she pulls this off, she'll probably be sub-Visser in a day. Visser Three'd have us on a silver platter."

"We got lucky with Aftran, Cassie," Jake said. He sounded exhausted. "It's a little early to start celebrating another lucky break. This whole thing with Sarah and Udrak... it's not only too good to be

true, it's too confusing. It smells of a trap. A very good one, but a trap is a trap."

"We can't jump to conclusions!" Cassie cried. "What if Udrak dies, and we're left with Sarah? What then? What do we do with _her_? How would we know if she'd betray us, or if she'd make a good ally? The only way... the only way is for one of us to have Udrak. And...." She shuddered again, clenching her eyes shut. "One of us becomes Udrak's host, and he dies inside. And that's the end. No Udrak, and we know what to do with Sarah. The _human_ Sarah."

Meanwhile, what do we do with 'the human Sarah'? I asked them. We can't just leave her out in the open. She's wounded. If the scavengers don't start flocking to her - not to mention hungry wolves - there's infection to worry about. They're not life threatening wounds by themselves, but if they get infected there's a good chance that she could get very, very sick..

"What about the place you guys kept me when I was a Controller?" Jake suggested. "That old shack?"

It's gone, I said. Burned to the ground back when we had to deal with the _Verdeek_. There's still the root cellar of it, but that's kind of buried under a few hundred pounds of scrap wood.

"We have elephant morphs, don't we?" Cassie pointed out. "At least, four of us do. That should clean it up pretty well, in no time."

"Problem." Marco held up his finger to silence the others. "Hooves were not meant to jump into a root cellar."

"Ax has his human morph," Rachel said. Everyone looked at her. "Hey, I'm _not_ a murderer." Marco cleared his throat loudly, glancing meaningfully at Rachel's right hand, which had found a comfortable grip on the Dracon Beam. Rachel ignored him. "I'm positive she's a voluntary traitor. But I'm open-minded. Maybe she isn't. Either way, I'm not going to kill her. At least, not unless she proves herself one way or the other."

"So we just shove this all on Ax?" Jake didn't like that idea; it was obvious from his voice. "We can't just have him baby-sit Sarah for three days, or whatever it ends up being. That's not fair to him. He has to eat, and sleep, and stuff. I won't do that to him."

Tree to Jake, I called down from the tree where I perched. I was jumping from tree to tree, getting ahead of the others whenever they got too far ahead. I can help him. Just like with the Hork-Bajir. The nice part is, we don't even have to move her, and I don't have to sleep in the open. I mean, six-hour shifts for each of us or something. I was sort of hoping he'd nix that, too. Still, if Ax had to baby-sit our Controller, I didn't think it was any more fair than Jake did if he had to do it all by himself.

"That'll work," he agreed. "But Cassie's right. What then? We have to know what to do with her. She can't go back. She can't leave. She can't stay." He shook his head. "It's just so messed up. She's willing to help, she says, but not if the Yeerk dies. The Yeerk will help, supposedly, but only if the human gets away. Without the Yeerk we won't know what to do about Sarah, and _with_ it we can't trust

either of them. It's a catch twenty-two. What're we supposed to do?"

"It's totally insane," Marco said. "I mean, remember when we went to save that Controller that messed up? You know - right before Cassie decided to quit? We kicked butt, but got nothing out of it. Now we do. It's just like it would have been if we succeeded then. What were we going to do then?"

Jake grinned sheepishly. "I don't think we planned it out that far."

Marco grinned, too. "My point exactly. Now, I suggest Tobias and Ax try to get something out of our Controller while the rest of us get lunch. I'm starving. I didn't even have breakfast. Man, we're lucky it's Sunday, or we'd really be in trouble."

"Speak for yourself," Jake said. "I wrote a note saying I'd be right back - I've missed church. I'll be grounded for a week, at least."

"No problem, man," Marco said. "Dad and I are going to noon. Just come with us - I'm sure they'll go easy on you."

"Especially if I keep you from snoring, right?"

"I gotta go, too," Rachel said. "My mom is taking the afternoon off from life. You know - kicking back to do whatever she wants. I got to watch Sara and Jordan - or come up with a good way of getting out of it."

"Dad's going to kill me!" Cassie cried, slapping her forehead. "I never changed that kestrel's bandage this morning. Jeez, I'm dead if he's got an infection. I got the meds done by the time Tobias came, but I totally forgot about the kestrel. We got him yesterday." Cassie had been the only one awake when I went to get them.

It was obvious that everyone was going their own separate ways. Time for me to pull guard duty. Okay, guys. I got to go help Ax interrogate our Controller.

"_Our_ Controller?" Rachel snorted. "Since when was she _our_ Controller?"

"Since Marco called her that instead of 'Sarah','" Cassie said.

"So sue me," Marco retorted. "I forgot her name. Sarah. Right. Udrak. Yeah." He pressed his fingers to his temples. "Ummmm.... Sarah... ummm... Udrak.... ummm..." Jake punched his shoulder, and Marco punched him back. "Hey, you made me lose my concentration! What were they again? Sardrak? Udrah? Huh?"

Rachel rolled her eyes. "Save some for me, okay, Tobias? Don't take all the fun for yourself."

I wouldn't dream of it, I told her privately. To everyone I added, Bye, all. I spread my wings, got a good updraft, and used it to propel me upward. I twisted in midair to face the right direction. Over all these woods, it meant a lot of flapping that I wasn't looking forward to.

The last thing I heard was Marco. That was not unusual. "Show-off," he muttered - I assume he was referring to me. Then he sort-of gasped, sort-of... well, it kind of sounded like a squeal. "There is another way!" he cried. "Cassie, you're a genius!" Anything else he said was lost to the wind.

CHAPTER 7

Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill

When the others left, Sarah and I were left in an uneasy silence. It was she who broke it.

"Do you have a family, Aximili?" she asked. "Other than your brother, I mean. Parents? Other siblings?"

I have... parents, yes, I answered slowly. What could she want to know about my family for? Was she attempting the human ritual known as "small talk"? Small talk is something humans do to fill in silence between two or more people. "Small" does not refer to the conversation itself, but more to the fact that those topics discussed are generally insignificant. Because of the war, my parents were allowed to have me after they had Elfangor.

"Birth control, huh? Happens a lot, when races get overcrowded." I said nothing. "I have a sister and a brother. My brother's older than me. He's darker than me, too. A lot darker. Like my dad. My sister and I - we're twins. Her name's Kelly. That's why I said most people call me Kelly. She isn't like me. She's popular, and likes to be with a lot of people. Not me. I've always been a loner. I've never trusted anyone. I never even trusted Kelly, not after... after Udrak. Not after I became a Controller. I was afraid they'd take her, if she found out. I helped find the Sharing, you know."

Of course I did not know that! How was this? I asked, keeping my voice as neutral as I could.

"Proving my worth." She sighed. She still held Udrak in her palm, but now she was stroking it gently with her finger. "Visser One was still in charge then. She had a different host, then - I don't remember what it was. She was studying as much human culture as she could before she tried becoming one. She had learned that humans often don't condemn children for their actions because they are not supposed to know better. She asked me what it would take to lure children into being Controllers. We told her how I was a loner, how I had become a Girl Scout to meet people. To do stuff. To be more than just another face, to be somebody. She liked that. She asked me how we might improve the idea. The first thing that came to mind was 'no merit badges'." She chuckled without humor. "The idea grew over the years. We started the Sharing a couple years ago - not what it is now, but a normal club. Only one Controller works through it. From there, we learned exactly what to do when we began a branch here, by the Yeerk pool."

Why was the Yeerk pool built here? I asked.

She shrugged. "The middle of nowhere, I guess. Easy access to the ocean and many important installations and a convenient landing area, but still relatively low-key. It would have been stupid to build it

under a big city, where there'd be sewers to breach and stuff. We needed someplace small, but not too small. Somewhere that it would go unnoticed. After that they drew straws or something. Dumb luck, pretty much. At least, as far as I know. Udrak has some connections, but only among his fellow nobodies. Like Iranu. Better known as Kelly." I looked at her sharply. She smiled blandly. "That's why I lost it, friend. Why I snapped at the Hork-Bajir. Called him... well, never mind what I called him. They took Kelly last week. At the Sharing. They made her a 'full member'.

"The Council isn't stupid - they insist that Controllers that must face each other day in, day out be friendly acquaintances, if not actual friends. Not only does it make it less likely that they'd get into an argument and give themselves away, but it's psychological, too. A friend to talk to. That's why they put Iranu Two-Nine-Four-Seven into Kelly. Because Iranu and Udrak get along. Iranu knows about us. She swore we'd get caught, just like Aftran did. But she helped us where she could. As far as I know, Kelly isn't too beaten down. Iranu just keeps her in line, keeps her from revealing that she's a Controller and does her spiel for the Sharing and stuff. Iranu gets her work done, and lets Kelly do anything that doesn't defeat that purpose. Iranu's a sympathizer, like us. She just isn't as radical as Udrak is." Her expression turned sad. "At night, Kelly and I were always free. We'd stare at each other and whisper to each other. Kelly hates not having control of what she says. She doesn't hate Iranu. She understands that Iranu is scared. A lot of us are scared." Then she sort of chuckled again, the same sad sound that seemed to be a chuckle, but did not seem in the least bit happy. It sounded more like she was trying not to cry. "Listen to me. 'Were always free.' I sound..." Her voice trailed away. She was staring at something I did not see, with a different sort of blank look on her face. It was not as if she was listening to something else while she was with me, but more like she was aware of something else that I was not, and unaware of me. "I sound like I'll never see her again," she said quietly. Then she straightened, the same resolved look that had crossed her face as when Udrak had abandoned its host and she was left to fend for herself among us. It was a look that was easily respected. "But that's more 'n likely, ain't it?" Her voice took on an odd accenting, a bit of a... a lilt, I think it's called. Something faintly foreign. "I can't go back, not since Kel an' I stopped dressin' alike. Sure, people mix us, but not on the side. I ain't got the tail no more."

Tail? I echoed, surprised.

She regarded me with focused eyes, smiling slightly. It was a pleasant expression, if slightly condescending. Almost like that of a prince explaining something simple to a favorite pupil. "Ponytail, Aximili," she said, laughing. "It's a type of... well, it's a way for humans to wear their hair, if it is long. See..." She ran her hands down the sides of her head lightly, careful of her injury, and clasped them behind her head. "...we pull our hair back, like this, and tie it there, so it looks like a tail. It's called a ponytail - tail for short." I recalled seeing many humans with their hair tied in that way - mostly females, but some males as well. "My hair used to be a lot longer, almost a foot. I wore it back so it didn't get in my face. Finally I couldn't stand it anymore, so I got it cut short. Kelly got hers shorter, too, but she still ties it back. That's why we can be mistaken for each other, but only from the front. Otherwise, other people see that... whoever they're looking at... has

the tail or doesn't."

It is very confusing.

She shrugged slightly, more with her right shoulder than her left. "Lots of people without them think having an identical twin is all fun and games, but it's not," she said. "Sometimes I feel like I have no identity. Like, instead of Udrak and me being one, like Kelly and I are one in the same instead. What really gets to me are those people who seem to think it doesn't matter which one is which - those ones that just sort of shrug and refer to us as if we were Siamese or something - as 'you', not as 'Kelly' or

'Sarah' or even calling me 'Casey'."

Why do you have two names? Most humans have only one.

"It's a little invention of mankind's called the 'hyphen'." She chuckled, then regarded me in a curious fashion. "You know a lot for an Andalite, Aximili. Do you have human friends somewhere? Knowing humans the way I do, there are some weird enough not to mind a weirdo stumbling around like he's a dog trying to walk on his hind legs and trying to work his mouth. Heck, you probably couldn't even speak at first, could you, when you did the human morph? Humans learn language. With thought-speak, how could you know how to move your tongue right?" That was a very good point; I hadn't thought of that. It was a startling fact; how had I had any idea how to speak English correctly? "You must get out a lot, to know as much as you do." She sighed, then lay on her back, her upper body propped on a slant by her elbows. She gingerly placed Udrak in the moist mud next to her. "Doubt I'm going to get out much. What are you Andalites going to do with me anyway? I mean, I hate to point out the obvious, but I'm just a puny little human. After millennia of sheltered living humans have kind of evolved away from living in the wild. I can't just live outside, in the rain, sleet, snow, and eat grass and drink spring water. Okay, spring water I can handle - soda's no good for anybody anyway - but I'm omnivorous, not a herbivore like you. I need a special balance of nutrition. Meat. Dairy. Food Pyramid. Health class. Man, I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm going to miss health class. I mean, I can't ever go back. You wouldn't believe how many Controllers are out there - at least, around here. One in ten, at least. Probably even more than that." I stiffened at that; that was not good news. "It gets a lot thinner as you go along, but I'm not safe anywhere around this state. I... I have to disappear, somehow." She bent her arms, propping herself up less, and manipulated her mouth so that when she sighed again the hair that fell over her forehead was blown upward by her breath. "I am going to get so bored so quickly it is not funny. How in our three worlds can you stand the monotony, Aximili? No music, no games, no friends? Oh, right." A sad look crossed her face. "You have friends. That's how."

It felt as if my hearts turned to lead when she said that; she had no idea. No idea that I was the only Andalite among my allies. And that was how it had to be. Why did she have to understand that? It was harder to remember to remain on guard, knowing she understood what I have felt ever since I crash-landed on Earth.

Yes, I said simply. I am not alone.

Hey, Ax. Did I miss much?

I tried to appear casual as I scanned the sky with my eyestalks alone. I spotted Tobias easily this time. We were talking. She has given me some information that is of some interest.

You know, I could grab that Yeerk and squish it between my talons before that girl could blink, I heard him say. But right now the others are trying to figure out exactly what to do, and for now we've agreed to keep our good friend Udrak alive. Tonight we're bringing her to what's left of the shack where we kept Jake when he was a Controller. He dove suddenly at the ground. Hang on a minute. I see lunch. I waited patiently.

"Someone come to relieve you?"

I turned my stalk eyes toward her once more. How-

She grinned. "You haven't heard a word I've said, have you? Oh, well. I was rambling anyway. The fact that I asked you the same question four times sort of gave it away. And, by the way - just because I'm human doesn't mean I can't tell when you're staring with your stalk eyes."

One of the warriors has come, yes.

"What's their name?"

I paused. I couldn't tell her that his name was Tobias; Tobias is a human name. He will decide whether or not to tell his name, I said at last.

"Which one was he? The tiger, the gorilla, or the one I couldn't see? What was that last one, anyway - an ant?"

He was a hawk, I answered. The Yeerks already know we use hawk morphs. That is what he is now.

Her eyebrows drew downward. Her voice was sympathetic, unthreatening, but what she said made my hearts skip. "You mean he got trapped?"

I did not say that!

"You're right, you did_n't say that," she echoed in a calm, reassuring voice. "No need to get all defensive - I just misunderstood what you said. Sorry. I didn't mean to be right."

I was about to reply when I stopped; I had gotten defensive, and revealed a terrible secret! How had I been so stupid?

There was a very awkward silence - at least, for me - until Tobias finally appeared. He landed on a branch just above the height of my stalk eyes, and began to preen his left wing with his sharply hooked beak. So what's news, Ax? he asked me privately.

I have found that she has an older brother and an identical twin sister. Her sister is a Controller, whose Yeerk is sympathetic to Udrak's beliefs but too frightened to be as... liberal as Udrak is, I told him, keeping my stalk eyes on Sarah while I faced Tobias. Sarah was still reclined, her eyes on the Yeerk, and running her finger

down the length of it every once in a while. She helped to found the Sharing, by providing Visser One information on some form of organization she belonged to as a human. The Yeerk pool was built here rather than under a city to avoid sewers. She and her sister can be mistaken for one another from the front, but nowhere else, because her sister has a 'tail' and she no longer does.

'Tail'?

She tried to explain it to me, but it was rather confusing. It had something to do with her hair.

Oh. Don't worry about it, Ax - it isn't really that important. Anything else?

She does not like having a twin because it makes her lose sense of being an individual. And that she has two names - 'Casey-Sarah' - because of a machine called a 'hyphen'.

'Hyphen'? A hyphen isn't a machine, Ax - it's... well, it's part of our alphabet. Or at least part of our grammar. It's a line that connects two words, instead of a space.

Why?

It just does. He turned to look at Sarah. I could not tell if she was ignoring him, or truly unaware of his presence. Do you need anything? he asked her.

She looked up at me, then followed my gaze. "So that's where you are. I don't know whether to be sorry for you or envy you, nothlit. A hawk can't become a Controller."

Tobias glared at me. Ax....

"Don't blame him, hawk," Sarah said, before I could explain. "It was an accident. Aximili told me that you were in a hawk morph, but I warped his words by mistake. You can't blame him. He's just a kid. If anyone, blame me. It should be easy for you, and I take blame pretty well."

I felt embarrassed; why was she sticking up for me? I dug at the ground with one of my forehooves, lowering my eyes, as if I was looking for something in the hole I was making. She tells the truth, Tobias, I told him privately. I... I didn't mean to. She asked what you had been before, because she hadn't seen you, and I said that you were a hawk, and that you were in that morph. My exact words were, 'that is what he is now.' She took it to mean that you were trapped, but I didn't mean it that way. I-

Ax, Tobias interrupted patiently. Apology accepted, okay? Then his thought-speak took on a lighter tone. We kids always make mistakes. I hadn't gotten to my apology, but I was glad Tobias accepted it anyway.

He turned his focused gaze to Sarah. It struck me as slightly peculiar; Sarah met his gaze as easily as if she were meeting the gaze of another of her species. Just as she met my gaze, no matter which eyes I use to look in her direction. She struck me as a person not easily surprised. Is there anything else you wish to tell?

"I get it," she said. She picked up Udrak, sheltering him in her hands so that, if Tobias swooped, he would hurt her but be unable to injure the Yeerk. It was a casual but obviously deliberate movement. "Send the guy with the yellow eyes to interrogate the human-Controller. Let me guess - you think I'm a voluntary traitor to the human race. I'd rather think of Udrak as a voluntary traitor to the Yeerk race. But that's not important, is it? By the way - yellow eyes don't bug me. It's nothing compared to half the stuff Visser Three has acquired." She looked away, and her chin wobbled, just slightly, as young human children's chins wobble when they are about to cry. She didn't cry; she just refused to look at us for a long moment, then turned back. "There's nothing you can do that could defeat what that... that... that...rrr- karruyak dapsen _dival_ trrra_!" The last four words she said in a mix of a hiss, a snarl, and a shout that I would have believed could only come from a Gedd, if I hadn't watched them come from her human mouth. It was a very disturbing thing to witness.

Umm... what did she just call him, Ax?

My father was polite to say that I had a "working vocabulary" when it came to Galard, the closest thing known space has to a "standard" language. In other words, I knew only the simplest of terms, phrases, and grammar. I barely passed the course after three tries. Fortunately, members of the Andalite military - even arisths like me - are implanted with special translator devices that are able to morph with us. The translators are of course set to understand Galard, or at least the translatable parts of it. "Dival" and "Tra" had no translation. It would also be.... unnecessary to print what the other words meant.

It meant... it wasn't a nice thing to say, Tobias. I would rather not repeat it. I left it at that.

Tobias didn't. I could almost imagine him smiling. 'Karuyak dapsen dival tra', he repeated. I'll have to remember that. Then he focused his attention on seeming like a stiff-tailed warrior again. Cursing Visser Three gets you nowhere with us, he snapped.

She laughed. "You think I did that for fun? I'm the one of the family who can't say the stronger version of 'darn' without feeling guilty. It's just that I have nothing more polite to call him without making that traitorous bastard seem fuzzy as a kitten and twice as innocent." Then she looked away again, her expression turning pained again. "Family. Huh. That's kind of in the past, isn't it, now?" She looked at me, then Tobias. "As I told the aristh, whatever-your-name-is - I don't know because Aximili thought it would be more proper for you to introduce yourself if you felt like it - humans are a bit of a handful as pets. Just ask Visser One. Hers gave her such grief for awhile that she considered calling off the invasion." I made a mental note to tell Marco that; he would be glad to hear it. You see, Visser One's human host was - I should say, _is_ - Marco's mother. "We need shelter, clean clothing, cooked meat, vegetation that isn't quite as... crude as you enjoy it... enjoyed it... whatever..." She shrugged a little. "What I'm trying to say is-"

We are dealing with that as you speak. Tobias was passing off well as a warrior. You will have a place to sleep for the night.

"How about lunch?"

If you are hungry, it will have to wait.

"He's never been out so long."

Tobias and I were silent for a long moment, caught off-guard by the sudden change of subject. Then Tobias demanded in his serious-warrior voice, What are you talking about?

"Udrak, of course. In all our years together, he's never been out of my head for over an hour. Oh, jeez!"

On my life, I swear that it looked as if she was trying to throw the Yeerk in her ear. She swung her hand up and slapped it to her ear, as if to squash the Yeerk between the side of her head and her hand - or to force him into her ear as quickly as possible.

CHAPTER 8

No! Tobias shouted. Or maybe it was me. I don't know.

The Yeerk squirmed eagerly into her ear. "Oh, man, I'm so sorry!" she cried out, not to us but to the Yeerk. "Man, jeez, what was I thinking! You could have dried out!" Then her eyes went out of focus for a moment, until she blinked rapidly a few times, then looked at us almost curiously. The slightly out-of-focus look returned to her nice-colored eyes.

Dried out? Tobias' thought-speak was directed at me. Do Yeerks dry out?

I... I don't know. I think so.

"Yeerks... Yeerks have to have a moist environment," Sarah said... but it wasn't like Sarah talking. Her voice was almost unnaturally patient, even though she spoke a little too fast. There was a strained quality to her voice, as if she wished to shout, but wasn't for some reason of her own. She blinked constantly, as if there was something in her eyes, which were opened too widely. Overall, it did not appear as if all was well with her. "She hadn't noticed that I had sucked all the moisture out of the mud she'd put me in. Not entirely pleasant, but better than nothing. That was why she put me on the ground - because I could not absorb enough moisture from her hands to keep from becoming... ill. One of the problems with being slugs. Especially slugs who only secrete enough mucous to coat ourselves just enough to breathe. We kind of evolved away from mucous secretion, considering we spend our lives in Yeerk pools and the brains of other creatures. Environments with their own sources of moisture. A coating of mucous is more a hindrance to us - except in the unlikely circumstance that we happen to be in the middle of nowhere, laying on the ground, where a silly little girl forgets anything about us except not to let us go anywhere."

Very interesting... Udrak Eight-eight-eight, Tobias said, his voice cold.

She closed her eyes for a moment; when she opened them again, she seemed normal again, although dazed. This was because the slightly

unfocused, distracted look to her eyes had not left with the other unusual characteristics she had shown. "I'm still Casey-Sarah," the Controller said. "Sorry. It happens that way. Udrak has to have full control the first few moments. It's faster for us because I open myself to him before he opens me himself. The connection is almost immediate - like plugging two wires together." A disturbed look crossed her face before she laughed weakly and attempted to smile. "Heck of a lot faster than logging on the Internet."

That is very convenient, Tobias sneered.

"You bet it is," she replied with a more realistic smile, as if she hadn't realized he was being sarcastic. "That way, we can be who we really are that much more quickly." Then she closed her eyes. Her voice took on the two separate tones, first of Udrak, then Sarah. "You still do not understand how we are joined, she and I. Without her, I would go mad trying to hide what I've become." It was here that the tone changed the first time. "Without him, I'd have nobody, and nothing. Nobody to trust, nothing I couldn't fear. I don't deal with fear well." Then the tone was Udrak's again. "I can't bear to be alone." Then Udrak forced himself against Sarah; the look of guilt on her face was strangely out-of-place when compared to his words. The odd, wide-eyed, strained-and-too-fast-voice quality returned. "You must give her someone to trust, Andalites, please. I can't go back to the pool. I won't let her be taken. Let her trust you, please. Give her what I have to- NO!" Sarah's face twitched, a look of anger and fear taking over her face for a moment, before the guilt returned. Udrak's voice became louder, more desperate. "I can't be here for her, Andalites. I am sorry for what we have done to you. I am sorry if what I ask puts you at risk. But... please. Don't let her... don't let them kill Sarah. You want to see a Controller beg? Fine. I'm begging. I'm beyond begging, I'm handing myself over. I'm bailing, leaving my host. I'm surrendering. You hear me? I surrender. I give up. I quit. Do what you want to me. I really don't care anymore, as long as you let...Sarah... live..." Her chin wobbled again, and she turned away, head lowered, eyes closed, everything about her speaking of defeat. "Do we have a deal?" she asked in a low, toneless voice. "Myself for the girl. Is it agreed?"

Our prince will decide what- Tobias began. Then he looked up, passed Sarah. Somebody's coming, Ax, he said. I'll go see what's going on. You stay here and make sure neither of them do anything crazy, okay?

I will do that, Tobias. Hurry.

My plan exactly, Ax-man.

"Where are you going?" Udrak demanded, glaring upward at Tobias when he opened his wings. The look of pure hate was bone chilling. "Answer me!" she shrieked. "Andalite filth! What's wrong with you! Answer me, now!"

Tobias ignored her and took off. I took a few steps away from Sarah. She saw that movement and glared at me. "What's wrong with your nothlit friend, aristh?" she snarled. "No taste for the war? You'd think a carnivore could stand it better than you herbivorian dapsen tra."

What have you done to Sarah? I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

I didn't like what I was seeing from Udrak now. Desperation. Hate.

"What does it matter!" she cried. "I'm dying, and all she can think of is saving me! Me! What business does she have to... to care so much? The Gedd didn't care! The Council doesn't care! Esplin doesn't care! Who should care about the traitorous freak? I'm not supposed to be this way! I'm not! I'm not supposed to care, and she shouldn't, either!" Tears fell from her eyes. It wasn't anger that made her shout; I could have faced anger easily compared to what I was seeing in her unfocused, crying eyes. But what she was talking about, what was making her cry, made my hearts almost too heavy to bear. Udrak was shouting because it was ashamed. It wasn't shouting at me, or anyone else; it was just venting its shame. Then the crying stopped; her voice shaking almost beyond recognition, she continued in a near-whisper. "What's a host but hands and eyes and an annoying voice in the back of your brain? That's what it's supposed to be. But no, I can't deal with the voice. The Gedd didn't have a voice anymore. I couldn't deal with her voice. I couldn't ignore it. The crying, scared, pitiful voice - I couldn't just ignore it and go on with my life. I had to help it. I had to make it like me. I cared what that stupid voice said." She sobbed, sitting up and hugging herself tightly with her strong human arms. She spoke louder, as if shouting would ease the pain of Udrak's shame. "Hosts are supposed to be hands and eyes and annoying voices. They're not supposed to have hearts. They're not supposed to have souls. Taxxons don't have hearts, only hunger. The Gedd didn't have hearts, only fear. Only fear. All that hosts are supposed to provide their Controllers are hands and eyes and voices and extra fear. The Gedd had a simple, continuous fear, but it had given up. It didn't plead for release, it didn't beg for mercy or pity." Her voice lowered again, back to the quiet whisper, but it grew steadily louder until she was shouting once more. "But this one... this stupid little girl... what had I been thinking? Why didn't I just let those idiots kill her and be done with it? Instead I'm stuck in her and dealing with her fresh, hot fear. But I couldn't take on any more fear. I just couldn't. My family, gone. My friends, dead, except for my best friend... worse than dead, that... that... that Visser!" She sobbed again. "There's just too much fear," she whispered. "Fear of Andalites, of the Council, of the officers, of death, of life, of war, of promotion, of demotion, of capture, of discovery, of torture, of... of... of what I've become. Of everything. Of everything, and everyone.... all the fear. To live is to fear. And the one escape from fear is the most frightening possibility of all." She rocked herself back and forth, still hugging herself. "I haveto ignore... the voice," she whispered. "I have... to ignore... the voice. I have... to ignore... the voice. I have... to ignore... the voice...."

The monotonous repetition of the sentence was more horrifying than the long outburst had been. It just continued, over and over. I couldn't stop it. Something had snapped in Udrak, and all that remained for him was fear, shame, and that one sentence, over and over. Where was Tobias?

Ax? What happened? What's wrong with the Controller?

Tobias! At last! Something is wrong with Udrak. Something has... changed.

Tobias returned to his perch in the tree above me. He took a moment

to watch Sarah rock back and forth, and mutter, "I have... to ignore... the voice. I have... to ignore... the voice..." Oh, man... His voice was quiet. I think Udrak's lost it. This isn't good.

Who is coming?

Marco and Cassie. The others figured out how to tell what the truth is, so they've got company. But if we can't get Udrak to cooperate, even a little, then... well, then we're out of luck.

Company?

It was then that someone stepped into the small clearing, a boy the same age as my friends. He was accompanied by a pair of wolves, one on each side. In his hand he held a human-modification Dracon beam. "Shut up, Udrak!" he snapped in a cold voice. "Stand up, or I harm the host."

CHAPTER 9

Sarah stopped muttering to herself. She stopped rocking back and forth. Slowly, unnaturally slowly, she turned cold, dead eyes on the newcomer. "Well, hello, Fivret," she said in a toneless voice. But that was all.

"Stand up, Udrak," the newcomer said again. He pulled the trigger on the Dracon beam, and a thin beam cut a lock of hair off Sarah's head, coming dangerously close to her head wound. "Stand up, or I aim about four inches down and to the left." Four inches down and to the left placed the beam directly in the middle of Sarah's forehead.

"Nice to see you too, Fivret," she said in the same toneless voice. "I see the Andalites have their own traitors, too. Let the Andalite and the girl go, and I'll stand up."

"My business is with you. Stand up and abandon your host. Now."

"The Andalite goes free."

The Andalite will do no such thing, Marco said.

"I'm not surprised to hear you again, monkey," Udrak said, looking down at the wolves. There was no sneer in her voice, no trace of the bravado she had always previously shown; everything about her nature was unnatural: lifeless, as if nothing mattered anymore. Obviously, however, that was not the case, if Udrak was petitioning for Sarah and I to be set free. "And I don't care which of the others the other wolf is. But the Andalite boy goes, or I will make it very difficult for you." Obviously, she had once again missed seeing Tobias.

"Leave, Andalite," the human-looking boy said. "Now."

Don't go too far, though, Ax-man, Marco added privately. We might need you. Just move out of sight.

I'll go, I said so that everyone could hear me. But the girl is unharmed.

"My business is with the Yeerk alone! I really don't care about your pet! Now go!!" the boy snapped. I moved away, turning my back on them all. Once I was sure Sarah could not see me I stopped and turned.

"What is going on?" she demanded suddenly, a ghost of her original tone emerging again. But it was hollow, uncaring. "Who are you? You are not Fivret Two-Eight-Two-Three."

The boy re-aimed the Dracon beam. "Exit your host, Udrak. Now."

"Who are you?" Udrak demanded again.

The Dracon beam fired. A piece of her collar burned off; if anyone else had fired the weapon, I would have thought the beam singed her neck. Udrak didn't even cringe away. "Out, Udrak, or I improve my aim."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "You are not Fivret Two-Eight-Two-Three. I would know that filth anywhere. He'd have killed me by now, instead of making threats about 'improving his aim', unless... ordered otherwise?" Then she shrugged. Just shrugged. "Ah, well. Better die through torture than starve to death. I'm coming out." With that, she climbed heavily to her feet, straightened her shoulders, and blanched her expression. Slowly, a tendril appeared out of her ear, then the Yeerk slid heavily from her ear canal to her shoulder. From there it slithered a little forward before slipping off her shoulder and falling, flipping as it did so, to the ground. It landed upside-down next to her foot. The newcomer hurried forward to pick up the Yeerk before Sarah blinked, once, twice, then sobbed. "Udrak..." she whispered, her eyes filling with tears. She looked at the newcomer, her eyes narrowing again, but this motion made the tears in her eyes fall, so that the warrior-worthy expression did not have the affect it once did. "Who owns Erek King now, huh?" she demanded in a snarl. "Who are you, you filthy slug?"

The newcomer - Erek King, an ally of ours - smiled then. An honest, friendly smile. "No one owns me, Casey-Sarah," he said. "No one has in an extremely long time."

CHAPTER 10

Erek King belongs to a race known as the Chee. The Chee are a race of canine-like androids that are incapable of violence, but have infiltrated the Yeerks and are able to provide us with inside information. Although he appears human, he is actually an android that resembles a dog walking on its hind legs. He looks human because he is able to form a holographic image around himself, so that he appears to have a smaller human nose, small human eyes, human arms and legs, human ears and human hair, even though in reality he has a short muzzle, larger eyes, paw-like hands and feet, and no hair to speak of, just ivory-like plastic and steel-like metal.

Erek dropped the Dracon beam to the ground, kicking it over to Sarah. "Here," he said. "We recharged it for you. I'm sorry I threatened you like that, but I don't think Udrak, in the state he was in, would have responded to anything less."

"He's starving," she replied in a quiet, hurt voice. "He's stressed out and hungry and in pain like you wouldn't believe. He only has a

matter of hours now before he dies because I was stupid, and he's scared and tired and... and he just doesn't want to deal with anything anymore. This war is destroying him."

Erek nodded. "I understand. Now, I am going to reveal why I am myself. I've known you a long time, Sarah, and I know this will be a bit of a shock, to say the least. Only know that I regret not doing this sooner. Please, do not be frightened." With that, Erek shut off his holographic projector.

Sarah's eyes widened more than I would have thought they would be able to. "No. Way." She was unable to say anything further for a few moments. "What are you? Besides not the Erek King I thought you were?"

"I am called a Chee," Erek replied. "The Andalites have asked me to help them prove whether or not you and Udrak are telling the truth. If you are, no harm will come to you. If not... they will deal with you as necessary. And I am still Erek King. I'm just the original article now."

Sarah clenched her hands into fists and bit her lip. "If you want to prove it, it only proves you're smart," she said at last. "Udrak wants me safe. If that's what it takes to make him happy, then go ahead. Just don't hurt him."

"I will make this as painless as possible," Erek promised.

Sarah looked ready to faint. I re-entered the clearing, seeing no more reason to hide. Sarah looked at me, her eyes filled with pain. "You knew," she said. She sounded hurt, as if she regretted putting any trust in me. It was not a tone that I enjoyed; it made me feel ashamed, even though I knew I had done the right thing. "You knew who - and what - he was. You knew, and didn't tell me." She tried to smile as I approached, ready to apologize, but she did not succeed. She did not give me a chance to explain, either. "Thank you." She took my hand in hers and squeezed it a little; if it offered her comfort... after being witness to Udrak's outburst so intimately, I would not deny her it. I know I would have desired comfort, if I had felt that sort of shame first-hand. Also, it eased my guilt at having misled her.

The front of Erek's head opened, pulling away from the rest of it. Inside was a small, hollow chamber, and in that chamber, wrapped in fine, hair-like wires, was a small gray slug, exactly identical to the one the Chee held in his stubby-fingered, very paw-like hand.

"Is that... Fivret?" Sarah whispered.

"Yes," Erek replied. "He is fed Kandrona rays every three days from the same power supply that runs my holographic generator. But otherwise, he is helpless. The wires do to him as he would do to me - render him helpless, and tap into his memory."

"But it doesn't hurt?"

Erek smiled again. "Only his pride." He held Udrak close to Fivret, before sliding him off his hand and into the small chamber. More hair-like wires sprouted from around the chamber. Some poked into the

Yeerk; others simply wrapped around him, rendering him immobile. Erek stood still, allowing what information Udrak could provide to enter his database. It only took a moment for Erek to download every single memory Udrak had.

"My," he said. "Oh, my."

What is it? I asked.

Sarah squeezed my hand again. "He knows," she said in a quiet voice. It was neither a guilty voice, nor a triumphant one; she was merely stating the truth - that Erek knew exactly where Udrak stood - so to speak.

Erek looked at me. And smiled. "It seems we have an ally, Aximili," he said. Then his expression darkened. "But not for long," he added.

CHAPTER 11

Tobias

Erek returned Udrak to Sarah before we left her with Ax. It was quiet while the four of us returned to civilization. Erek was surprisingly fast; we made it back in three hours. As I said, though, it was a very quiet three hours - Erek had a lot on his mind, and wouldn't talk to us, and we let him alone. We met the others in Cassie's barn, where they were waiting for us. After Cassie and Marco demorphed, though, the numb surprise of what had happened wore off and Cassie hugged the living daylights out of Marco. "It worked!" she cried. "You're brilliant, Marco!"

"And cute to boot," he replied. "Come on, Cassie, thank you very much and all, but I'm having trouble breathing and Jake is getting jealous."

After we explained what had happened, Erek sort of took charge. "Udrak is dying, quickly," he said. "He spent over two hours out of Sarah's head, and lost at least a day's worth of Kandrona rays in trying to keep equilibrium in spite of the stress he was under. Worse, he refused to accept my offer to replenish him. Udrak has committed himself to dying, which he will do by noon tomorrow."

"Oh, no," Cassie whispered.

"We finally come across a Yeerk who can help us, and he's set on suicide?" Rachel shook her head. "Jeez."

"Sarah is scared," Erek continued. "She just won't admit it."

"Sounds like someone else we know," Cassie said in a kind voice, looking pointedly at Rachel.

"The problem with Sarah is that she cannot return home," Erek said. "She knows it as well as we do. If she and Udrak turn themselves in, then she will most likely be re-infested. The only other possibility is that she will be killed. Of course, she finds neither choice acceptable."

"I think I could get to like this Sarah," Rachel said.

"Sarah is angry. Mostly frightened, but also angry. She has a surprisingly strong spirit, for one who has been a Controller as long as she has been. She would be a great asset to our cause. She is willing - and able - to fight. But what she needs is medical attention, nourishment, and a way to go on with her life without the presence of Udrak. Unfortunately, to be frank, she cannot do that."

"Cannot do what?" Marco asked.

"Go on with her life without Udrak." Erek paused a moment. "I downloaded every memory Udrak had. His entire family, nearly all the friends he had, were killed as traitors because they refused to cooperate with the Council of Thirteen. One of his friends, though, survived. That friend was an ambitious, energetic creature, by the name of Esplin Nine-Four Double-Six. The prime twin."

"Oh my God," Cassie whispered.

Visser Three, I said, my voice low and toneless.

Erek looked at me, then nodded. "Yes. Udrak and Esplin came from the same three parents. They stayed together a long time, until... well, until Esplin joined wholeheartedly into the war and Udrak hung back. Esplin found ecstasy in having a host, while Udrak found it horrifying. They have been on... less friendly terms... ever since. Esplin believes Udrak to be weak, and a coward. Udrak considers Esplin a traitor and a tyrant."

"I think I could get to like this Udrak," Marco said. His tone, however, showed that he was using an overstatement to make a joke. "You got to admit, he has a way with words."

He called Visser Three a 'karuyak dapsen dival tra' earlier, I said. Ax refused to translate.

"Yes, he did say that," Erek laughed. "It was very... unpleasant of him to say such a thing."

" 'Karuyak dapsen dival tra'? What's that mean?" Rachel asked.

"Wasn't that lumber company the Yeerks tried out called 'Dapsen', or whatever?" Jake pointed out.

Erek chuckled. "Think of the four most derogatory words you know. Then triple their cruelty. Your mothers wouldn't wash your mouths out with soap if they heard you say those words, and knew what they meant - they'd make you eat three cakes of it."

"You kiss your mother with that mouth, Rachel?" Marco teased.

Erek was serious again. "What are you planning to do with Sarah?"

Jake shook his head. "Not a clue. The best we could come up with was putting her in an old root cellar, but... well, that's kind of stupid. If we can trust her, we need to. Somehow, we have to help

her. And Udrak, if he'll let us."

Erek looked thoughtful. "Perhaps...."

"What?" Cassie prompted him.

Erek frowned, looking down at the floor. "Many of the others would not approve. But...." He looked up, and grinned. "She doesn't like big ones too much, because one attacked her when she was little," he said. "But, as a whole, Sarah likes dogs."

It took a moment for us to catch up. You mean... have her stay with you guys? Live with the Chee? I said.

"It is a possibility," Erek said. "She'd probably like my 'cellar' a lot better than the one you have in mind."

"I know I would," Cassie said, grinning.

"Do you think enough of the others would 'approve' to have Sarah stay with you?" Jake asked.

Erek frowned. "That's the trick. I know those that have infiltrated the Yeerks with me would jump at the chance to help you in any way. Any way we can, that is." He paused, closing his eyes.

The Chee were programmed by their long-dead creators not to kill. However, the Yeerks got ahold of a tiny, impossibly (by human standards) powerful computer of the Chee's creators, which we managed to steal. With it, Erek rewrote his programming. He made himself able to kill to save us. But in that... he didn't kill. We were in a battle, and losing. It was a miracle the crystal-like computer got to him. And he destroyed every one of the Yeerks. He didn't kill them. He annihilated them. Massacred them. I have to kill to eat; it disturbs me, sometimes. You try living with the fact that every time you have to eat you have to kill a rabbit or snake or rat in cold blood. It's either that or roadkill. Or starve.

It isn't fair, I know. But sometimes, when I don't think I can stand killing my own food anymore, I remember what Erek did. And it doesn't feel as bad as the memory does.

Erek changed his programming back. He can't kill anymore than any other Chee. But Chee are androids - they never forget. I can't remember how many Hork-Bajir and human-Controllers Erek killed, or how each died. But Erek will always remember, every last detail of it. He wants to be able to help us unconditionally, but he has killed; he knows that he can't deal with any more memories of it. He has accepted his place as merely an informant.

That one memory helps us both accept ourselves, I guess.

Erek continued as if the pause hadn't happened. I almost wondered if I had imagined it. "The others - I do not know how they will react, exactly. Some will agree, simply because not to agree would most likely lead to Sarah being killed. Indirectly, it would be our fault, and in that would be against our programming. Others would not see it that way - they would believe it to be your problem - like the Yeerks - and nothing to concern ourselves with."

"Sounds like we let Ax and Tobias deal with her again," Cassie said. She didn't sound happy as she looked up at the rafters. No - she was looking at me, even though she was talking to Erek. "You three could bring her to your home, right? It wouldn't threaten any of us, and we can just say that Tobias got his morphing ability back and acquired his human form. That's true, at least."

One thing on that, though, I spoke up. Sarah wants to know my name. She wants to know all our names, if I read her right. She believes we're going to take care of her, one way or the other, if we keep her at all, and that she needs to learn our names if that's how it's going to be.

"Tobias is correct," Erek said. "Sarah and I have gone to school together ever since I changed schools. We were not really friends - we said 'hi' in the halls, and had a few classes together."

"Sort of like you and me, once upon a time," Marco said.

"Yes," Erek agreed. "Sarah is not very good with names; she doesn't remember them very well. She deals with it by repeatedly asking someone their name until she gets it right. I should know. It took her two weeks and nine requests before she remembered my first name." He smiled. "And over a month before she finally learned to spell it right." His neutral expression returned. "She won't rest until she learns each of your names. And, unfortunately, all your names are very much human."

"While there's still a chance she could be captured, we can't let her know who - and what - we are," Marco said. "Not a chance."

"Why not?" Cassie asked. "If she can stay with the Chee, then... then she'll be safe, while we go on with our lives. She'll have someplace to stay. If only we'd thought of it, and it could have worked, with David."

David was the name of the biggest mistake we Animorphs ever made. He was just a new kid in school who wandered into the construction site where Jake, Rachel, Cassie, Marco, and I met Prince Elfangor, Ax's brother, my dad, and the Andalite who gave us the power to morph. (Yes, I said Elfangor was my dad. I don't know if he realized that before he died; I never will. All I know is that I received a letter on my last birthday saying that he was my father because, once long ago, he had run away from the war between the Andalites and the Yeerks, to a planet called Earth. There he got married, settled down, started life over as a human. That is, until an all-powerful alien made him return to the war, erasing all traces of his existence on Earth, including my mom's memories of him. All that remained was me. It would seem totally bogus, if I didn't happen to know that all-powerful pain-in-the-tailfeathers creature personally. They call themselves Ellimists. The Ellimist gave me back my morphing power in return for a favor - errand, more like. But I'm rambling, and I have a different flashback to get back to.) David found the blue box - the Escafif Device - that gives those who use it the ability to morph, intact and very much usable. He made the mistake of advertising on the Internet about it. Visser Three learned about it and came to get it. We managed to save David and the box. We used it to make him one of us. The thing is, having lost everything, he was very fragile. As in, he kind of cracked. At least, I hope he cracked. If he didn't, then he was just plain messed up to begin with, and we didn't know

it. He turned against us. He killed a red-tailed hawk because he thought it was me, almost killed Jake, attacked Ax, and stalked Rachel to scare her. He did it all by using his morphing ability. Finally, he left us no choice; we led him into a trap, getting him stuck in a morph, like me. But he was trapped as a rat. Prey. We set him loose on a small island that was full of other rats. As far as I know, he's still there, alive and living as a rat.

I wonder if he regrets eating bugs the same way I do rabbits. Doubt it.

Then it struck me, why Cassie might bring up David. Cassie, I said, you're not thinking what I think you might be thinking. Tell me, please, that I'm wrong.

"Make Sarah one of us?" Rachel sounded as skeptical as I felt. "We don't know anything about her. She was a Controller. She's marked by the Yeerks. The last thing we need is another David. I'm not going through that again."

"Sarah is nothing like David - or what I knew of him," Erek said. "She is reclusive, yes, and very bright. But, after that, I see no resemblance. Her forte is that she often sees what is hidden right in plain view. She would be a very good addition to your side, as far as I know. But I know her only from a couple of classes. She would have been a good student if she had any interest in her work. However, she seemed more interested in doodling in her notebooks and writing short stories and bad poetry."

"Poetry? Doesn't sound too hostile," Marco said. "But bad poetry? That's a different story." He shook his head, turning instantly serious. "We rushed with David. That was where we failed. We can't do that again. Last time, I said we shouldn't make David one of us because we didn't know him. Of us, only Erek knows Sarah. He knows her because he knows everything Udrak knows, which is probably more than even Sarah knows."

Marco usually acts like a jerk. It's his way of dealing with the pressure of saving the world, I guess. But he has a habit of seeing what we overlook. Not what's right in front of us, necessarily, but something we've missed that is very important. Everyone's eyes went to the android.

Erek shrugged a little, shaking his head. "I know Sarah, a little bit - but I know what I know of her, and what Udrak knows of her." He looked around at each of us. "What I know is that she is smart but without focus, and has a tendency of being insightful. Though quiet, she can be stubborn, too." He paused noticeably. "What insights Udrak gave me also favor her. Though she won't fight someone who has decided for themselves, she will never hesitate to speak her mind if she knows what she says will be taken into consideration. She is very loyal - 'to a fault' does not begin to describe it. She is also respectably brave - one only has to know that she held six 'Andalites' at bay with an empty Dracon beam with a badly burned shoulder screaming pain in her head without so much as a grimace to know that. She is patient and quiet, but by no means harmless." I thought back to the expression on her face as she pointed the Dracon beam at Marco's head. Her jaw was clenched shut, her eyes narrowed and flashing; the expression had been almost as focused, angry, and unyielding as mine is - when I'm a hawk, that is. Her arm had shaken,

just slightly, obviously from the pain of holding the Dracon beam pointed at its target in spite of her injury. Even balanced in a crouch, half her hair burned off and shoulder hideously red from the burn and the strain she was putting on it, one hand protecting Udrak, she looked ready to take us all to keep him safe.

Wait a minute.

How did Udrak know about that? I demanded. He wasn't in her ear when she pointed the Dracon beam at us! She only did it because he had

come out of her ear and she was trying to protect him from us!

The others turned to Erek, realizing that I was right. Erek smiled. "I could go over every single word that was said between when he left her ear and returned - though some of it is kind of mangled, as his memory suffered somewhat when he found himself drying out." He chuckled. "He read her memories afterward, and knew exactly what she remembered of it."

I thought about it while Erek explained why he had said "drying out" - I was glad I didn't have to explain, because I didn't quite understand it all. From what I'd seen of Sarah, she was brave, loyal, and courageous. More than I can say about David, who turned out to be a backstabbing coward. I change my vote, I said when Erek was finished. If it ever comes to making her one of us or getting rid of her, I vote that Sarah becomes an Animorph.

"We have to start somewhere, if we want to have more of us to fight," Cassie said. "David was a mistake. Nobody had any idea about him. But there's no way Udrak could lie to Erek. If Sarah's all that, then she's about the best person for the job."

"That's just it," Marco said. "This Sarah is just too good to be true. We're the underdogs in this war - sometimes literally, I might add. We're not supposed to be that lucky."

"How does she feel about the Yeerk Empire, Erek?" Jake asked, his voice giving away nothing.

"What she knows of it first-hand, or from Udrak?" Erek didn't wait for an answer. "She doesn't hate the Yeerks. The only thing that gives her life meaning, stability, is a Yeerk. He is all that matters to her, because he is all she can trust in. He is the most real thing in her life. He is all she has. No, she does not hate the Yeerks." He paused again. "What she hates is the war. She hates the consuming greed of most Yeerks for more than the simple pleasures of sight and mobility, the ones who wish to rule the universe - and especially the ones who see it as their destiny. She hates the whole political, greedy nature of the war." A small smile showed on his holographic face, one of respectful admiration. "She does not hate the Yeerks. But, given the chance, she would fight. She would gladly fight. She would not fight for the human race, however - not as you do. She would fight for the Yeerks - those Yeerks who, like yourselves, are caught in the middle of this war that they want no part of. But she would not fight for any one race, either - she would fight for the innocents, all the ones caught in the crossfire." His smile became something different, more... pleased. As if he had won some major

award or contest. "I, personally, would be honored to give her sanctuary."

"Goody," Marco chuckled. "We got ourselves a regular Batgirl. Supergirl. Spidergirl. Robin Hood-ette. Forget David - the last thing we need is another Rachel." But his decision was obvious. "I guess I'm with Bird-boy. Sarah becomes one of us - but only if there is no other choice."

"She isn't too much like Marco, from what I can tell. So I guess I'm for it, too." Rachel crossed her arms. "If it comes down to life or death,

Sarah's an Animorph. Period."

It was Cassie, Rachel, Marco, and me. Jake and Ax were the only ones left, and Ax wasn't there. But I'd seen how he hadn't made Sarah let go of his hand when she took it, when she needed comfort. Something was happening between them; I don't think Ax had noticed, but Sarah had a respect for him. Somehow, within less than twenty-four hours, he had become about as close as she had to a best friend as she probably ever had.

Twenty-four hours? It hadn't even been a day since we'd discovered Sarah, and we had already decided to make her an Animorph rather than let her die? Hadn't that been exactly what it'd been with David?

No. David we'd decided to make one of us in less than half a day. Half a day? Heck, we'd decided in an hour! And we knew less than nothing about him - well, other than the fact that he had a snake named Spawn and a cat named Megadeth. Thanks to Erek and Udrak, we knew more about Sarah than she would probably admit about herself. Possibly more than she knew about herself. I thought back to what she had said, just before Udrak had taken her over, and whatever had happened to make Udrak lose it for a short time. "I don't handle fear well," she had said. But I also thought again about her set jaw, narrowed, flashing eyes, and the barely noticeable shaking of her arm as she very convincingly bluffed six 'Andalites' who could easily have killed her with a hand-held Dracon beam that was dead that the very weight of, much less the position of her arm, made her arm hurt terribly.

Yes, we knew more about Sarah than she did herself.

"Ax hasn't voted," Jake said, "and I feel bad about making this decision without him. But I'm with you guys." He sighed, as if the very idea of taking on a new Animorph was the most exhausting thing he could imagine. "Sarah stays with us. For all practical purposes - which, at this point, does not include letting her know we are human - she is one of us, and will be treated, within reason, like one of us. I don't think I need to explain, but if I do - we don't tell her who and what we are. No names. No human appearances except Tobias and Ax. We don't let her anywhere near our houses. Not until we're certain she can handle the pressure. And, if there is no other choice, and everyone believes she can take it, she becomes one of us. That means unanimous vote. Cassie - we'll need you to get the morphing cube. If we have to make Sarah one of us it might be on very short notice. Erek, would it be possible for you to keep the blue box?"

"No one will question it," he said agreeably, then grinned. "Not as much as they will when I suggest we shelter her."

Can't you just tell them? I asked him.

"Showing you the underground 'kennel', as you once so rightly called it, was one thing. No one could change what I had done. Once you had seen it, there was no changing that fact. It was immediate and short-term. Keeping Sarah with us is long-term and how long it will be is indefinite. For all we know, it could be between a few minutes to a hundred years. This is not a rash decision that can be dealt with on a long-term basis. It is a long-term project that must be considered carefully."

"In other words," Marco said, "us knowing about it is one thing because the Chee don't have to deal with us when we've got morning breath and a bad hair day. Caring for a human probably won't be as much fun for them as taking care of their dogs is."

"Not so much as being as much 'fun', as... fulfilling, I'd say," Erek said. "But, otherwise... yeah, I'd say that about covers it."

Jake sighed again, and pressed his thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose in an obvious sign of a major headache. "One thing at a time," he said. "If things take a turn for the worst, we're agreed Sarah becomes one of us. First, though, we have to deal with keeping her safe. So we got to get her to the Chee as soon as possible."

"I can't just bring her home with me," Erek said. "It's not like she's a stray. For one thing, she lives only three blocks away. It's not like she can go walking straight there, right in the open. The other is that the others would be willing to brake me to spare parts if I were to pull a stunt like I did with you anytime within the next century. I have to clear it with them, and have a full vote on it. That could take up to a week. For the vote, that is. We don't tend to meet all at once, for cover, but in emergencies we can do it. But still, that'll take a day or

two, at least. Everyone has to be notified, and arrive, or send their vote...."

"So we still need a place for Sarah tonight, in other words," Marco said, once again summing up Erek's words.

Erek nodded miserably. "Right again," he agreed.

"Root cellar?" Cassie asked skeptically.

"Root cellar," Rachel confirmed.

CHAPTER 12

Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill

Sarah did not hold my hand after Erek returned Udrak to her. She instead put the Yeerk up against her ear, letting him return to her head. It still disgusted me to see her allow the foul creature to do that, but I remembered what Erek had told me before he and the others left us. "Udrak hasn't lied to you," he had said. "Everything he has said is true. Take it easy on him, Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill - he

isn't doing well, and he deserves any respect you can spare him. Trust them, if you can't do anything else."

I tried concentrating on his words, rather than on Udrak re-entering Sarah's brain, but I couldn't. I didn't want that Yeerk to live. I didn't want any Yeerk to live. They didn't deserve to.

But then I thought back to what Udrak had said. What Erek had told me was true. I had lost my brother to Visser Three; Udrak had lost his entire family, all his friends, but for what might remain of one friend who had become Visser Three.

Did Udrak's shame include the Visser? I thought of my friends, back on my home planet. I thought of my friends, the Animorphs. If one of them became a great and powerful enemy, if one of them became like Alloran-Semitur-Corass had become, the Andalite that had become the Andalite-Controller, Visser Three? Would I have felt ashamed of that?

Yes, I realized. I would be ashamed of myself, for not finding a way to save them. For not being able to stop what had happened. I would be plagued forever with the guilt of wondering, if I had done this little thing, said this one word, would it have been any different? Could I have kept them safe?

"A penny for your thoughts, Aximili."

I looked down at Sarah. She looked very tired; her eyes had a droopy appearance, as if her eyelids were too heavy for her; odd shadows beneath her eyes made her appear quite old. Her forehead was wrinkled because her brow was lowered heavily over her eyes. She was on the ground again, propped up on her elbows, but her shoulders weren't straight and strong and yet relaxed, as they had been before; she seemed to droop between them, as if they were the only things keeping her from laying prone on her back. Her strength seemed to have left her completely, with only exhaustion to take its place. I am thinking nothing.

"You're a horrible liar. Come on. You can tell me."

No. It is nothing. Her skeptical expression did not change, so I decided to reword my answer. It is nothing you would wish to hear.

She put her weight on her left arm, so that she could rub one of her temples with the fingertips of her right hand. "I'll listen to anything right now, friend," she sighed. "Anything."

I scoffed at the ground with one of my hooves. I was thinking about Udrak, I admitted. I felt embarrassed.

"No wonder you looked disturbed." She sat up, then patted the ground beside her. "Come on. Take a load off." I did not understand. I suppose my expression showed this. "Lay down, relax. I don't bite." She saw my hesitation. She closed her eyes and sighed. "Ax," she said, her voice revealing the obvious strain she was under, "Udrak is dying. I can feel him dying. He's crying, Ax. He isn't talking anymore because he's hurting too badly. I can't feel his pain anymore than he can feel mine. But I can't block his pain, either, not like he can mine. And I can hear him, Ax." She shuddered. "He's going mad,

Ax. Lack of Kandrona rays. He has hours, if that. Can you imagine it?" She sobbed; tears stung at her eyes. "Can you imagine, starving until you've got mere hours? The hopelessness, the pain of it? I can't feel it, Ax, but I can hear him. I can't tune him out. Just... just talk, okay? Just keep talking to me. I need something else to listen to." She rolled on her side, resting her head on her crossed arms, and closed her eyes. "I... I just need someone else to listen from now on...."

I looked down at Sarah with my main eyes, to the sky with my stalk eyes. With one pair of eyes I looked toward my home, where I had friends like me, where my family knew I lived, but that I had brought nothing but disgrace to them. With the other, I looked at a pair of creatures, one I could see, one I could not; neither who could face their families, if that were even possible; neither who were truly home. Neither who would ever truly have a home, ever again.

One was a Yeerk. One was a human. I am an Andalite.

And yet, the three of us were alike. We were alone.

Or were we?

I jerked a little at a strange, gentle sound. I looked down with all four eyes, where Sarah lay on the ground. She was making the strange sound, one that, after a few moments, I recognized. It was one that I had heard when I posed as Prince Jake many months ago, when he had been taken over by a Yeerk and we were forced to hide him. It had come from his parent's room; it turned to be his father. When I asked Marco about it the next day, he said it was called "snoring", something that some humans do when they sleep.

She was already asleep? Most humans took much longer to fall asleep; most Andalites do, as well. I know I do.

I sighed; I, too, was very tired. It had been a very long day, and there were still many hours left until tomorrow. Walking carefully to be as quiet as possible, I walked to Sarah's side, then lay down, folding my legs comfortably underneath me. She stirred, opening her eyes, and smiled slightly. "Hey there, Andalite," she mumbled. She pushed herself off the ground just enough to edge forward, then rested her head against my flank. "Night," she muttered, closing her eyes again. I smiled in spite of myself - it wasn't quite three o'clock in the afternoon; there were still three hours of strong daylight left. She fell asleep just as quickly as before, but unlike most humans, her face did not lose its expression; she still appeared disturbed, tense. She did not snore this time, but that is not to say she was silent; she spoke in her sleep, unfinished sentences and short, incomprehensible words, some I recognized, some I didn't. Not all of the words were human ones.

I know what it is to be alone. I also know what it is, having to sleep with nightmares. Sleep well, Sarah, I said, though I couldn't tell whether she heard or not. I was surprised at how tired I felt. I closed my main eyes, leaving my stalk eyes open to watch over us all. Sleep well, Udrak, I added. After saying that, it felt like a great weight was lifted from my shoulders; before I knew it, I, too, was asleep.

That, as it turned out, was a great mistake....

.... and the start of the strangest hour of my life.

CHAPTER 13

"_Aximili_!!"

I nearly fell on my side from the shock of scream right in my ear - but, for some reason, the pain was dull, hazy, like it was happening in a dream. Ahh! I scrambled clumsily to my feet, snapping my main eyes open and refocusing my stalk eyes; they'd gone lazy from the depth of my slumber, I thought. It happens sometimes.

"Move further, Andalite, and you die."

I was confused - everything seemed hazy, out-of-focus. For a moment, I thought Erek had returned, but the voice was wrong. Too deep, too feminine. I turned my eyes to regard a human female, perhaps forty Earth years old, with hair the same color brown as Sarah's and darker eyes. She held a normal Yeerk Dracon beam to Sarah's throat.

Stay calm, I told Sarah, but I don't think my voice was very soothing. It sounded oddly strangled; I didn't know why. What was wrong with me?

Sarah looked at me with wide, staring eyes filled with fright. She stood rigid, the weapon at her throat, just staring. Then she started screaming hysterically. "He left me! He left me!" she shrieked, then fell silent, trembling.

Something about her voice made me shudder...something... I don't know, it... it echoed, somehow.

What was wrong with me?

--

Do not harm the girl, I told the stranger.

The woman's smile was twisted, somehow; it wasn't at all kind or reassuring. It was the smile of an evil creature with an obvious upper hand. "Whyever would I harm the poor little thing?" she sneered. She kissed Sarah on the reddened, bald part of her head. "I'd not harm a hair on her head - or what's left of it." She laughed. "Stand down, Andalite filth. Lower that tail and come quietly."

"He left me!" Sarah screamed again. Her uninjured arm shot upward; she pointed at me with a shaking finger. "There! Leave me alone! He's in _there_! He left me!" she wailed.

I thought you understood, Sarah, I said openly. But... I didn't say it.

The distraction increased. I felt dizzy, as if I was caught in a state of gravitational flux. It was then I heard the voice. The strained, shaky voice that sent shivers down my spine.

Shut up, filthy Andalite! it hissed at me. Sarah and I do not sleep at the same times - it's safer that way. I was not asleep when I

heard her and her Hork-Bajir coming, so I left Sarah instructions and escaped to you. We can make it out of here, but only if you cooperate. Is that clear? The voice laughed without humor, a failed attempt at soothing my growing fear. Even at my strength now, Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill, you cannot defeat me. Do not kill us all, or be certain - if Sarah is harmed in any way, you will suffer a great deal before the others have a chance at you. You do not want to know the kind of suffering I can devise for you if she is hurt.... There was no questioning it; the voice was telling the truth. I could feel the anger, the absolute madness dampened only by the concern for Sarah.

For Sarah.

Udrak.

Udrak was in my head..

My immediate reaction was to resist, but I didn't. I couldn't. Udrak was right - the only thing I could do was follow his plan, whatever it was. I could feel his weakness; if I resisted, it would show, and we would be taken. And I didn't want to think of what something as pain-crazed as Udrak was would do to me if I did not comply. His pain was a nagging at the back of my mind, a further addition to my confusion, but it didn't truly hurt me.

My eyes focused on their own, but everything was covered in a veiled

haze that I realized was me. I saw as Udrak saw, but I still had control of one of my stalk eyes, which was unfocused because I hadn't known that I had control of it. There was the human woman - a Controller, obviously -

Her, and two Hork-Bajir.

The girl is not to be harmed, Berrent. It is Berrent Four-Nine, isn't it?

"One-four-nine," the woman replied, her expression becoming suspicious.

She is a willing and useful host. And a favorite of mine. Esplin would not appreciate your toying with my things.

"What are you talking about, freak?" she snapped. "You are to be turned in and taught a lesson. Conspiracy with a host is a serious charge, and I'm looking at a serious reward."

I could feel Udrak's cold anger, a boiling rage kept in check by his starvation. By whose order? he asked in a patient, condescending voice, like an adult to a very young, very stupid child. I did not know my voice - for Udrak was speaking in my voice - could sound that way. It sounded so much like my father that I had the illogical urge to giggle.

The confusion increased. "What does it matter? You are in my custody, and will surrender!"

You did not speak of this to your Visser, I - Udrak - stated coldly.

That is worse treason. _Whose order_, Berrent?

She scowled at me. "Sub-Visser Twenty-two."

I'll be sure to have Esplin eliminate that filth from the hierarchy, then, I - _Udrak_ - said, as if it didn't matter. Now, let the girl go and I'll consider not doing the same to you. You're rather close to an official position, aren't you?

"Shut up!" she snapped. Her grip on Sarah tightened; Sarah cried out.

Udrak's rage was overpowering. I felt my tail twitching with his immeasurable anger. It swung forward, pressing against the human-Controller's neck. Let her loose, or lose your head. Your decision, Berrent. Be quick, or I'll be quicker.

"Go ahead," she sneered at me, but she was shaking, scared. "Then the Hork-Bajir will deal with you, and I'll be a martyr. Is that what you want, traitor?"

Udrak had been waiting for just that moment. Before the Hork-Bajir could pull their own weapons, but not before they were off-guard as they reached for them-

FWAP-FWAP! FWAP-FWAP! FWAK!

-their heads were on the ground, followed moments later by their bodies. Long before then, however, the flat edge of my bloodied tail slammed into the Dracon Beam, sending it flying from her grip, and returned to the human-Controller's throat. The entire thing was over in less than five Human seconds. It was something I would never have attempted, as I would never have suspected myself capable of such speed and accuracy. You were saying? Udrak sneered.

The Controller knew things were no longer in their favor. She pushed Sarah from her. Sarah stumbled, thrown off balance; my tail whipped forward, the blade pointed downward, so that the tail itself caught Sarah before she fell. She broke into tears, wrapping her arms around my waist. "I'm sorry..." she whispered under her breath and through her tears. "This isn't right."

Now go. I'll return shortly, Udrak said. I've yet to become accustomed to my new host, and I thought to surprise Esplin. Tell nothing of what has occurred here.

"They are sure to ask questions," the Controller said. She pointed down at the fallen Hork-Bajir. "Especially about them."

Say you were attacked by Andalites. My face smiled as Udrak laughed harshly. You would not be lying.

"Shut up."

Don't talk to your sub-Visser that way, I snapped. Sub-Visser Twenty-Two may outrank me, but only until Esplin has dealt with that filth. Even at Sixty-One, however, I far outrank you, and since you have no orders on the contrary, you shall obey them.

"You only have your rank because of Visser Three," she snapped. "You

aren't worth your rank. Everyone knows it. You think sub-Visser Twenty-Two will be dealt with harshly? Just wait, traitor. Yours is still to come."

How... amusing, Udrak said coolly. Thank you for your time, Berrent. Now go. Or do I have to use this wonderful new body to make you?

"Where are the others?" Berrent demanded suddenly. "The Andalites. Where are they?"

That is none of your concern, Udrak snarled. You try my patience. I'll make my report directly to my Visser once I've got this foolish host under full control. Now go before I make use of the tail once again. It really is a wonderful tool.

"You wouldn't dare," the Controller sneered. "I'm related to your pet. She would hate you."

Do not try me, Udrak said. He moved my tail into a defensive position as a warning. Now go. Sarah, come with me.

"Why take the child?"

If this is to be a surprise, she cannot return, Udrak explained calmly. Really, let me do the thinking, Berrent, I'm far better at it. You just go on your way and report as I've told you.

"Yes... sir," the Controller snarled. "Right away, sir."

Udrak suddenly let go. Very suddenly, I was free except for the stalk eye that Udrak had let me keep. It was odd - as if he had traded control of my entire body for that one eye. He trained it on the Controller. Get us out of here, Andalite, he murmured. He sounded... tired. Exhausted, actually. I numbly felt his weakness. Say nothing. Just... just get Sarah away from that.

Sarah did not appear well enough to walk on her own. I wrapped my arm around her shoulders to steady her, and began to turn away from the Controller.

From the stalk eye Udrak controlled, I saw the Controller leap for her weapon. She snatched it from the ground, and took aim.

Berrent wasn't stupid; she didn't want to harm me. She pointed her Dracon Beam at Sarah.

NNNNNNNNOOOOOOOO! Udrak screamed so loudly my head rang with incredible pain. He snatched control of my tail, snapping it in the direction of the Controller, his panic not throwing off his aim the slightest margin.

Rather than as I would have done, however, Udrak didn't aim for the trigger finger, or the hand, or even the arm.

I watched with horror as my tail went through the Controller's

chest_.

And not the middle of the chest. My tail sliced cleanly into the Controller, below the left shoulder, just where the heart would be.

"NO!" Sarah screamed. "No, Udrak, _no_!" She burst into sobs, running from my side to grab the Controller as the woman fell to her knees. A look of great shock was on the woman's face. "No, no, no..." Sarah repeated, shaking her head in rhythm to her words.

My vision clouded with Udrak's rage as a small, gray tendril began inching from the woman's ear. Slowly, heavily, the Yeerk - Berrent - slithered from its host's ear, until finally it fell to her shoulder, then rolled off and to the ground.

Sarah hugged the now free, but still fatally injured human, close to her in spite of the blood that poured over them both. "No, no, no...." she murmured, tears streaming from her eyes. "No, no, no...."

"Sa-Sarah?" the woman stammered. She turned shock-blinded eyes to Sarah. "Sarah, I'm bleeding," she said with utter calm.

"Yes, yes you are," Sarah agreed, attempting to smile, for what reason I could not tell. "But it'll be okay, you'll see."

"Get the first aid kit, Matt," the woman said, looking at me without seeing. "Kelly, please call an ambulance. Darren, use your cell phone to call the neighbors - someone has to watch the girls while we're gone."

"No, no, it's all right," Sarah said. "You'll be fine, really. You don't need an ambulance. It's just a little thing."

The woman looked back at Sarah and smiled. "My ever-practical Sarah," she said. "Never change, little girl."

"I'll try," Sarah said. A sob escaped her. "I'll try."

The woman nodded. "All right then. I think I just take a nap, then."

"You do that," Sarah said. "See? You're already in bed."

"I am, aren't I? Silly me." The woman lay back on the ground; Sarah allowed her to. "Wake me up in an hour and a half, will you, Sarah? You know Kelly always forgets to wake me up."

"I'll do that," Sarah said. "Don't worry about a thing." Sarah brushed strands of hair from the woman's face. "Don't worry."

The woman's body suddenly relaxed, but she hadn't closed her eyes.

Sarah did it for her.

Then she turned away, covered her face in her hands, and cried.

I? I was just standing there like the fool I was, too shocked to do

anything more. My ear felt numb; I could somewhat feel Udrak crawling out, but not truly. It was like something had bit my hoof; a vague feeling that, were it anywhere else, it would hurt dreadfully.

As Udrak tumbled off my shoulder, I looked down at the ground with all four eyes. I saw the body of the woman; I saw Sarah; I saw Udrak making his way toward her; I saw....

....I saw Berrent, crawling slowly away.

But I had to ignore that now.

Sarah, I said. Sarah?

She was quiet for a long time. "Aximili," she said after a long moment. Her voice was soft, strangled, as if she were speaking even though she couldn't breathe. "Aximili, you'll help me to bury her. Here."

Bury?

"It is human tradition to bury our dead. In the ground. In a casket - a

box, a special - WHY?" I jumped at her sudden outcry. She lowered her head, shaking it, as she sobbed. "Why did he have to kill her? Why? No! No!" She looked down at the two slugs near her; Udrak, who had reached her leg and was touching it softly with his feelers, and Berrent, who for some reason seemed blind, and was slithering in circles nearby. "They destroyed her, didn't they?" she whispered, as if to herself. "Berrent took her life without me knowing, and Udrak took her life, right in front of my eyes. Which was worse, Aximili? Slavery, or death?"

She sounded so calm, so indifferent. I said nothing, for there was nothing to say.

"Which should I squash, Ax?" she asked, sounding suddenly enraged. "Which of the disgusting slugs deserve to die? Hmm? It's up to you - you're my friend. You're all I got, now. Now, with this." She stared down at Udrak. "What this thing has done to me." She looked up at me, eyes narrowed, chin shaking. "Which is it, Aristh_Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill?" she demanded in a voice so like that of a great war-prince it took several moments for me to collect my thoughts.

I didn't know. I honestly didn't. What was this woman's relation to Sarah? I needed to know that, but I didn't know how to ask. So I just told her what I did know. Udrak did it for you, Sarah. He was protecting you.

Sarah laughed. It was not a nice laugh. "Did it for me," she echoed, with extreme sarcasm. She laughed again, smiling a little, and shook her head once more. "Did it for me, did he?" She reached out with her left hand, and picked up Berrent. With her right, she picked up Udrak. She brought both to her eye level, staring at both. "Hmm. Did it for me? Hmm, yes. Berrent didn't do it for me, did it? Well, then. I suppose that's your answer." She stood. "For me. For me. No one cares about you, do they?" she asked the woman. She received no answer, of course. "Fine then. For me." With that, she turned her

left hand upside-down, letting the Yeerk it held fall to the ground, helpless, and crushed it beneath the heel of her shoe. "For me."

I had to know. Sarah, I said.

But she wasn't listening. Instead she held Udrak up to her ear. "For me," she said again.

As Udrak slithered into her ear, I asked her. Sarah, what relation did this woman have to you?

"What relation? What relation?" Sarah was silent, then, as Udrak took over for a few moments. Then came her answer, and I wished that I

had never asked.

"Aximili," Sarah said, "that was my mother." Then she turned to me, her face expressionless. "We're going to need a shovel to bury her, Ax," she said. "And help." She clenched her right hand, then relaxed it again. She clenched it again, relaxed it.

She did that for a few moments, keeping her eyes averted from the woman who lay on the ground between two beheaded Hork-Bajir. "I'm sure Cassie will be willing to help," she said at last.

CHAPTER 14

Prince Jake was not happy.

No one was, in fact.

I did not know where Cassie and Sarah were; Cassie had insisted that Sarah come with her once we had contacted the others, and that everyone else remain in the barn. I was worried about Sarah - considering what had transpired, she should have been very upset; instead, she had seemed almost mechanical, from when we went to see Cassie, through the burial of the human-Controller and Hork-Bajir Controllers, until when she and Cassie had disappeared.

Meanwhile, I was left to face Prince Jake, Rachel, Marco, and Tobias on my own. It was not a pleasant situation.

I was worried about Sarah, yes, but at the moment I had far more to worry about than just her.

"You let that Yeerk in your ear?" Rachel demanded.

"I fell asleep!" I said. I was in my human morph. "I did not give my permission! Shun!!"

"And there was nothing you could do," Marco said. There was sarcasm in his voice.

"Yes," I said. I knew he did not mean what he said, but he was still

correct. "Yes, there was nothing I could do. NO-thing. I was helpless. As helpless as any Controller."

"You shouldn't have let her have Udrak back!" Rachel said. "Now she knows about us! What are we going to do if she's captured, huh? I'd like you to tell me _that_!"

"I can't!" I shouted back at her. I forced myself to calm down before I continued. "I can't do that, Rachel. _Chel_. And I could not take Udrak away - I'm the only reason he's alive." I explained the choice Sarah had made me make. "Would it be better if she had put Berrent in her ear?"

"She wouldn't have done that!" Rachel snapped.

"Yes, I would have."

Everyone fell silent. Cassie stood in the doorway of the barn, her arm across Sarah's shoulders. Sarah's eyes were very red. She wore a new shirt and jeans, as well as a hat, hiding her injuries and allowing her to discard her blood-sodden clothing. "I would have put Berrent in my ear," Sarah said. "I was... upset." No one made any comment about the severity of the understatement. "Would you have liked it any better if I had shot Aximili and returned with him to the Yeerks? Erek gave this back to me." She pulled the modified Dracon beam halfway out of her pocket, then let it fall back in again. "That's what would have happened. But, instead, I know who you are. Just me - not the others. Berrent wouldn't have left Ax there, obviously. Which would you rather - one strike against you, or the entire ballgame over with?"

Rachel was about to reply - angrily, I might add - but Prince Jake beat her to it. "Sarah is right," he said. "And so is Ax. It's better that she knows - it saves us a lot of grief. And there was nothing Ax could do. End of discussion. It's too late to change anything."

Rachel still looked angry. Marco did not look pleased, but he seemed to be taking the news better than Rachel was. Prince Jake was also upset with what had happened, but he believed what he had said. Cassie sat next to Sarah on a bale of hay, talking to her too quietly for my human ears to catch. As always, it was difficult to tell what Tobias was thinking; his hawk face is not very expressive.

Sarah said something to Cassie, then stood. "People - human, former-human, and Andalite," she said. "Cassie, Marco, Jake, Aximili, Tobias, Rachel. Friends, Aliens, Animorphs, give me a minute, okay?" When a human asks another to "give them a minute", it means that they wish the other to either wait for them, or allow them to speak. "I know this is the last thing you need - 'this', meaning, at the moment, us - Udrak and me. We know you have enough on your shoulders right now. More than enough. More than anyone deserves to have placed on them." She regarded each of us, one at a time, before continuing. "I can't just sit out, hide wherever it is I'm going to have to hide. I'm going to help - and there's nothing you can do about _that_, either. You're stuck with me, you and I both know that - I just want you guys to know that you're also stuck with my help." She sat back down. "So ask away."

"First things first," Prince Jake said. "We have to hide you."

"First things first," Sarah said, using a more forceful tone than

Prince Jake. "You recap for me what's been going on here. Such as, how six kids have been able to trick Esplin into thinking they're trained Andalite warriors."

"Not here," Marco said. "It's too dangerous."

"Let's go to Tobias' meadow," Prince Jake said. "We should be safe there."

Yeah, you ought to be safe, Tobias put in from the rafters. But Marco had better keep his big mouth shut, or I'm going to starve.

"Tobias, Tobias, Tobias. No way you could starve," Marco said. "I mean, come on! There's got to be at least a hundred bird feeders in town."

I'd like to see how well you like birdseed, Marco, Tobias retorted.

"Hey, who's the bird here?"

"It takes a bird brain to like birdseed, and Tobias is much too smart to like that stuff," Rachel said. She ruffled Marco's hair. "Marco, on the other hand...."

"Ah! Help me, it's Xena! She's on me! Get her off! Get her off!"

I noticed Sarah looking at me. She looked tired, but she was smiling a little. "Is this normal, Ax?" she asked me.

"Very normal," I replied. "Nor. R_rr_-MAL."

Marco laughed. "The girl who's under the control of a starving slug asks the mouthless alien-who-looks-like-the-four-of-us if the most cute boy in the state being ganged up on by a bird-boy and a blond Xena, Warrior Princess, is normal."

The others laughed. Prince Jake had once told me not to laugh when I was in human morph, because it "disturbed" him.

But, inside, I laughed, too.

It felt good to laugh.

CHAPTER 15

Three hours later, with the light of Earth's yellow sun fading in the west, the seven of us were gathered in Tobias' meadow. Tobias was in his favorite tree, but on a lower branch than usual, preening his feathers, while I stood beneath it. Next to me, everyone else was on a large blanket on the ground. In a basket they had brought sandwiches - various meats of other animals and other edible products placed between two slices of a dry, grain-based food that allowed them to keep their hands dry and relatively clean while eating - and sodas - a carbonated, water-based product flavored mostly with sugars, as well as various artificial substances. However, they had finished their sandwiches already; they had even packed one for me. It had been filled with a brownish-yellow substance called peanut butter. It did taste like peanuts, only a great deal sweeter, but it

did not remind me in any way of butter. It was very sticky: at one point, my mouth was almost glued shut. I was forced to take a drink of soda in order to loosen it. The sensation was uncomfortable, but not completely unpleasant. However, I found it impossible to speak with my mouth "glued" shut. The others laughed when I tried. "Ax, that is, hands down, the most human thing you've done all month!" Marco had said. I took it as a compliment.

However, the purpose of our "picnic", as my friends called the

gathering with food, was not to have my mouth stuck shut with peanut butter. The true purpose was for my human companions to fill Sarah in with what I might not remember, or had not been present for. Mostly they went over Elfangor's death, as they remembered it: I listened as attentively as Sarah did for that part. I enjoyed listening to the story of how they had rescued me. I did not say much; after all, Udrak knew everything I knew, and no doubt had shared it with Sarah.

That fact did not sit well with me.

However, three hours after we had left Cassie's barn, the stories were finished. Sarah took a drink from her can of soda, and shook her head. "You guys are amazing," she said at last. She'd been a good listener - she rarely interrupted, only stopping the others when there was something she wished to be explained in more detail, or if they said something she did not understand.

Then she changed the subject, to the one that interested her the most. "So the Chee are considering taking me in?" she said. "That's awful nice of them."

"The Chee have been a real help to us," Prince Jake said. "I don't know what we'd do without them."

"We'd scratch less fleas," Marco quipped.

"Now, Marco, you should know we are far more advanced than a few tiny bugs."

Everyone sat up. There was Erek, back again. This time, however, he had three very happy-looking dogs on three separate leashes, and a hat with a visor. He was wearing the hat. He smiled. "The vote's in," he said. "More think that inaction would endanger Sarah, then think inaction would excuse us from any responsibility."

There was quiet for a moment. "So I'm in?" Sarah asked.

Erek nodded. "Welcome to the Underground Dog Kennel, Casey-Sarah."

"Ugh." Sarah stuck out her tongue. "Techno-mutt or no techno-mutt, Erek King, you know how I hate being called that. You being a cyber-pooch doesn't change that, you know."

"I prefer the term 'canine-humanoid technid', actually," Erek replied, smiling. "Or, just 'Chee' would do."

"Cute," Sarah said. "Real cute, Erek."

"I try." The dogs strained on their leashes to reach the blanket, intent on searching for crumbs. Cassie tossed a piece of the breadcrust from her sandwich towards them. For some reason, she had peeled the breadcrust off, even though that had been the best part of the sandwich - well, my sandwich, at least. The dogs yipped happily. The one in the center snatched it and swallowed it whole. "These guys are our cover. We thought you might want to settle in as soon as possible."

"What?" Sarah seemed surprised. "Now?"

Erek raised one of his eyebrows. "Would you rather sleep here?"

It gets kinda cold out here, Tobias chimed in.

"No, I'll go. I just didn't expect it to be so quick."

"Neither did I," Erek said. He took off his hat. "Here. Wear this low over your face."

"Oh, thanks. I can't believe how technical you ancient androids are with disguises. Very advanced. How's this one work, exactly? I think it's too complicated for me." Sarah stood, dusted herself off, and took the hat. She took the one Casey had given her off and put the one Erek had given her on in its place, pulling down the brim until it was so low, I doubted that she could see directly ahead of her. "Let me guess. I also get one of the doggies?"

"Yup." He held out one of the leashes.

Sarah shook her head quickly. "Uh-uh. Not that one."

"What's wrong, Sarah?" Cassie asked.

Sarah took a step away. "I'll take mutt one or mutt two, Erek, but forget that one. I am not walking the lab. No way, no how."

Erek smiled reassuringly. "Sarah, this one won't harm you."

A pained look crossed Sarah's face. "Erek, forget it. I don't touch labs. Once was enough." As if out of reflex, she massaged her left hand with her right.

Then, quite suddenly, her face went blank. She still held one hand with the other, but all movement stopped.

Erek's expression changed from reassuring to polite. "Udrak, I'd assume."

"Yes," Sarah said. She held out her hand. "If it keeps her safe, I will deal with the Labrador." She took the leash from Erek with one hand, and pulled the brim of the hat even farther down. "We're ready." Then she turned sullen eyes on the others, whose expressions had likewise lost all signs of pleasure. "I thank you, for taking care of her," Sarah - Udrak - said. "I thank you for all you have done. I wish you luck with your fight. I regret that I cannot be of help to you, but it is simply not possible."

"That's not true," Cassie said. "You can help us!"

Udrak shook Sarah's head. "I'm more use dead than alive, Cassie,

and nothing you can say can change that. It is a simple truth that I have accepted, and that you must as well. To do anything else would be delusional and foolish."

"But -"

It is his choice, Cassie, I interrupted her. She glared at me, but I

continued. If Udrak does not wish to live, you cannot force him to.

"Thank you, Aximili. I knew I could count on you, Andalite."

I glared at Sarah. Even if I do not agree with him.

Udrak stared at me through Sarah's eyes, then, slowly, a grim smile appeared on her face. "Et tu, Andalite?" she said. "No matter. At least you're wise enough not to argue. Let us go, android. The longer we stay out here the less time I have."

Erek nodded politely. "Follow me." With that, he and Sarah left.

Cassie glared at me again, but said nothing. The others were quiet.

Soon afterward, the others began cleaning up. I excused myself, and, once out of sight of the others, I ran. Running helps clear my head.

I was so confused.... I desperately needed to clear my head. So I ran.

I did not see the small, Hork-Bajir army, with a pair of humans in the lead, until I was almost on top of them. I stopped short.

"The signal is getting stronger," the elder human, a dark-haired, dark-skinned man with a moustache, said. "We should come upon Visser Three's friend soon."

"Udrak hadn't done anything wrong," the younger one, a much younger human girl with long hair the same color as the crusts of the sandwich I had eaten, replied. "That sub-Visser was a fool to think he could get away with ordering him killed. Visser Three isn't happy at all. He's afraid, you know."

The man laughed. "Visser Three? Afraid?" He laughed again.

The girl turned her head sharply to glare at him. "I've known Udrak a long time. You don't get to know Udrak without knowing how close he and Visser Three are!"

My eyes widened, and I inhaled sharply. It wasn't so much from the younger human-Controllers words, as the clear, front view I received of her face when she turned it towards the other human-Controller

and, unintentionally, towards me as well.

The face was Sarah's.

A Hork-Bajir scout came up quickly, and almost silently, to the humans. "_Gruk_ humans _feldat_," he said in a gruff, quiet voice. "In meadow. _Beldren_ capture_ nevak_?"

The human-Controllers looked at each other. The younger - Kelly,

Iranu, whatever you wished to call her - shrugged. "Why not?" she answered the Hork-Bajir. "We could use a few more 'full' members to the Sharing." She laughed.

Unlike Sarah's laugh, I did not like it. Nor did I like Sarah, right about then.

CHAPTER 16

I had perhaps ten minutes to warn my friends. There was no way I could outrun the Hork-Bajir scout.

But then, the Hork-Bajir didn't have the ability to grow wings and fly.

I shut my eyes, concentrating as hard as I could. I felt the changes immediately, but my impatience made them seem slower than they should have been. The first change came in my legs, as my back ones began to grow stronger and merge with those in front.

Morphing is never logical. That was why, as my back legs grew stronger, they began to grow longer as well. They became a vague, yellow color. Quite suddenly, talons sprouted from my hooves, stiffening and hardening like an insect's exoskeleton. My fur began to grow lighter, grayer, and longer. My stalk eyes suddenly burst into plumes of feathers that slicked backwards, tight against my skull. My eyes grew larger, and spread farther apart, changing from their bright green to golden brown. My nostrils began to pull away from my face and turn yellow, hard. As they did, my lower face ripped open to form the beginnings of a mouth. I numbly felt my airway splitting and growing a new tube, allowing air to pass through the mouth. My upper arms grew longer as my lower ones shrank, and all but one finger on each deflating, then melting away. Feathers began growing from them in ranks, one row at a time. My elongated fur began turning into gray and white feathers.

I flapped my wings, too impatient to wait for the changes to end completely. My beak was still not hardened, and, for some reason, I had not shrunk at all: I was still the size of an almost-grown Andalite. As I felt the shrinking at last begin, I flapped, harder. I began to rise, but it was hard to tell; as I gained altitude I was still shrinking, so to me it was as if I wasn't going anywhere. At last, even the shrinking was done, and I caught a strong upwind that carried me above the trees. I flapped for all I was worth. I scanned below: there was the scout, moving silently through the trees.

No time now: I caught a thermal that sent me almost straight upward. I dove back downward, toward Tobias' meadow. Once in thought-speak range, I began shouting as loud as I could. Tobias! Prince Jake!

Everyone! Yeerks are headed for you position now!

I saw Prince Jake, Marco, Cassie, and Rachel look up. I couldn't see Tobias. Since none of the others were in morph, however, it was Tobias who answered me. How many, Ax?

Many, I replied grimly. There is one scout ahead of the rest. They're looking for Udrak.

There was a pause. They know he was here?

Yes. I watched as everyone's expressions turned to equally dark scowls. I believe Sarah is wearing a tracking device. Her sister - Kelly - is among the search party. At my estimate there are two humans, and perhaps eight to twelve Hork-Bajir. I spread my wings, catching myself, checking my dive; I was still a hundred feet in the air, but chose to make a safe landing. There's no way to outrun the scout, who has already reported you are here.

Prince Jake's scowl deepened. "We've faced worse odds, but I don't want to risk them," he said. "Leave everything here, guys. Split up, and head for the open. We'll meet at the mall, just in case the humans try following one or two of us in the open."

"But—" Rachel began.

"No heroics, Rachel," Prince Jake interrupted her. "We're going to have enough trouble keeping Sarah alive as it is."

"If she's wearing a tracker, the Yeerks could find the Chee," Cassie said.

"I know," Prince Jake replied. "When someone gets to the mall, the priority is to call Erek's. Let him know. It doesn't matter if he hears it four times - four is better than none. Now let's get out of here."

Ax, Tobias said, as the others began jogging away in four different directions. I turned my head sharply to view behind me. He was still on his low branch. Go to the other end of the meadow. If either of the humans have any idea about birds, they'll think we're fighting over the territory. See that tree across the meadow, the one with the big hollow in it? I turned my head again; the crooked, dead tree was easily picked out among the other ones. That's where my former competition lived. Go there.

I didn't reply; instead I simply did as he told me. I had barely enough time to get to my position when I saw the Hork-Bajir scout poke his head out from between the trees. I saw his nostrils quiver as he scented the air; he looked toward the picnic basket, in which all our garbage and the blanket were stored away, so that it was the only sign of our ever being there. He came into the meadow warily, one step at a time, as if expecting an ambush. He sniffed again, soon coming to the point where the four others had been together. He turned his head in one direction, then another, then a third. He snorted, then growled low in his throat: he knew they had split up.

After another moment's pause, he went after Cassie's path.

We have to warn the others where the scout is, I told Tobias.

Go after Cassie, he said. Watch for Marco: they went in nearly the same direction. I'll look after Jake and Rachel. He leapt from his branch, and I did the same from mine. We spread our wings almost in unison, catching the air, and went our separate ways.

I passed over the Hork-Bajir, spotting Cassie not far ahead, running as fast as she could. Unfortunately for Cassie, not only are humans slow on their two legs, but for a human Cassie has short legs, and is not very fast for a human. Cassie, the Hork-Bajir is following you!

She stumbled; I flew low overhead. "Warn me next time!" she gasped. Her breathing was heavy; she was tiring.

I just did warn you.

"When you're- going- to sneak up on me like that!" she explained between breaths. "How- am I go- going to get rid of- him?"

I lifted the front of my wings, using my momentum to carry me upward until I could see the Hork-Bajir, dangerously close behind her. Up ahead, there's a stream.

She nodded, understanding. "How- far?"

A few more feet.... three more steps. There! Her foot hit mud and slipped. Cassie went down. Stay still! I cried, lifting higher, above the

trees. Don't move. I hoped my plan to gain her time worked.

Cassie lay facedown in the mud, forcing herself to breathe shallowly and almost silently. The Hork-Bajir came crashing after her, leaped easily over the small stream, and continued on - not realizing that it had just leaped over its prey as well. Cassie gasped for air, then went along the length of the stream on hands and knees, as fast as she could. She got her feet beneath her, but walking on hands and feet for a human is very awkward, considering how short their arms are; she raised her hands off the ground, running while bent as far over as she could without falling forward again.

Marco! Tobias had said to watch Marco as well. I'm going to see if I can find Marco, I said. If you keep following this stream, you'll come to the highway.

"Covered in mud," she muttered. "Fun."

Unable to come up with a reply to this, I changed direction, heading more easterly, where Marco had gone. I flew for several minutes without finding anything at all. I was starting to get worried when I spotted Tobias in the air not far away. Tobias!

Ax. He flew closer. He did not sound happy.

Tobias, I cannot find Marco.

They got him, Ax.

What?

The Yeerks. He ran right into them. Three Hork-Bajir intercepted Jake and Rachel. How's Cassie?

I left her to look for Marco! She managed to avoid the scout, but I don't know how long that will last. We must find her again.

Lead the way.

I banked sharply, heading back the way I had come. Tobias flew beside me; this was no time for covertness. We had to protect Cassie, then go and get the others.

The others didn't fight - at least, normally, Tobias said. They knocked Jake out because he nearly ran right into one of the Hork-Bajir; Rachel's bawling and acting like an airhead. Marco fainted - but I think he's acting.

There's Cassie! I said, heading downward.

Ax! No! Pull up!

I saw it then; I hadn't at first, because the Hork-Bajir was the same dull color as the forest in the lessening light.

Cassie was captured, too.

A flash of light flew above me, singing my back. I pulled up sharply. What-?

Dracon Beams! We're being shot at!

It must be because we're so close together! I said. Someone does know Earth raptors!

Tobias didn't respond. The reason was simple. As I watched, horrified, he spun downward, his wing horribly burned by the Dracon beam that had narrowly missed me. I saw two of the Hork-Bajir below me taking aim. One Hork-Bajir carried Jake in his arms; another had Marco; as I watched, the scout approached the Hork-Bajir watching over a sobbing Rachel with a struggling Cassie prone in his grasp.

Ax, get away! Tobias shouted at me as he fell. Another Hork-Bajir, one without any of my friends to take care of, hopped to a position beneath Tobias, ready to catch him. Get away!

I knew he was right, but that didn't stop the feeling of utter loss in my chest.

Tobias was right, I had to get away.

I had to warn the Chee.

CHAPTER 17

I landed in a tree in Erek's front yard. Down the street, I could see two humans approaching, being lead by three happy-looking dogs. One wore a hat low over their eyes.

Erek! I cried.

The hatless figure looked up, startled, and looked around. I fluttered my wings a little. The hatless figure nudged their companion, who raised their head far enough that I could see the glitter of their eyes beneath the visor of their hat. The hatted figure dropped the leash of their dog, which ran ahead. The humans ran after it. The dog ran right to Erek's front door, and pawed at it, eager to be let in. The door soon opened, revealing Erek's father: when the dog rushed in, I flew in as well, followed not too much later by the two humans and the two remaining dogs.

"Aximili," Erek said, looking at me. I had perched on the back of his living room couch. "Is something wrong?"

I looked at Sarah, who was quick to remove her hat and throw it on a chair. Udrak is wearing some form of tracking device, I said. I didn't mean to sound accusing, but I did. A search party of Hork-Bajir, led by Kelly and another human, has captured the others.

"Tracking device?" Sarah said, her voice blank. Then she hit herself in the forehead. "Of course! I'm not wearing one," she said. "It's Udrak."

Udrak? I echoed. How is Udrak wearing-

"He's not," Sarah cut me off. "It's Udrak himself. The Yeerks don't like traitors very much, but they do happen, so the Yeerks are prepared for such things. They're using a device that tracks Yeerks."

There is such a thing?

"If it worked in space, I'm sure the Andalite people would love to have one," Sarah said in a dry voice. Then her expression darkened. "We have to get the others."

"How?" Erek asked. "I will help, of course, but we need a plan."

Sarah frowned. She fell onto the couch, sitting on the part under where I was perched. "Hmm... plan, plan, plan..." she said. "Need a plan, need a plan, need a plan.... umm..." She scowled. "Erek, is there somewhere I can ponder where I don't have to worry about Kelly appearing at your door?"

"Yes, there is," Erek's father said. "Downstairs, please." Sarah held out her arm; I flapped quickly, perching on it, and she, along with Erek, headed down into Erek's basement. When we reached the bottom of the stairs, I jumped off Sarah's arm to the floor, where I began to demorph.

Suddenly, the floor simply dropped. "Whoa!" Sarah said, crouching as if the floor had jerked several feet to the side, then straightened again, quickly overcoming her surprise. "Whoa," she said again. "Elevator. Thanks for the warning, guys."

I finished demorphing just as the floor finished dropping. One of the

walls shimmered, then disappeared, revealing a long, bright corridor. "This way," Erek said, leading the way at a slow trot. Sarah scowled slightly before following him. I kept pace with her.

It was not long before we reached the end of the corridor, at which point Sarah stopped suddenly and jerked backwards, as if she had hit a forcefield. She yelped in surprise.

You see, at the end of the corridor, there was a very large park. Within that park were several hundreds of dogs, along with several Chee. The amount of Chee surprised me: there had only been a half dozen or so when last I and the others had come here. Now there were at least thirty.

"Wow," Sarah breathed. "Umm... I have a room, right?"

"Yes," Erek said. "This way." He led us deeper into the dog-filled park.

Several of the Chee glared at us, although a few greeted us kindly. "I get a sense of not being wanted," Sarah said.

"It was a close vote," Erek said.

"Ah," Sarah replied, then closed her mouth, a look of concentration crossing her face. It was broken when a small dog suddenly came running up to her and, standing up on its hind legs, leaned against one of Sarah's legs, demanding attention. She looked down, startled, then smiled a little crookedly. She picked up the small dog, rubbing its head as she walked. I noticed that several of the glowering Chee looked away, as if suddenly satisfied that the vote to protect Sarah had been the right decision after all.

Behind a small stand of trees we came to a wall. A very sudden, very plant-covered wall. "This area was used for storage, mostly," Erek explained. "Kibble, some freezer units for fresh meat, that sort of thing. We cleaned out one of the larger closets for you."

"Thanks," Sarah said. She had paused before answering, and there was a note of indecision in her voice. I wasn't certain that she was thankful at all.

"Here," Erek said, pressing his hand against what looked like a butterfly that was resting against a bare space on the wall. His hand went right through it: it was a hologram. A door, previously invisible, slid aside to the left of the fake butterfly. He stood aside, motioning that Sarah and I should go in before him. "Hope you like it," he said. "It's a little plain, but I'm sure you'll find something to do with it."

Sarah walked in quickly; I was right behind her. Erek followed me, and the door slid closed behind him, shutting out the sound of the dogs outside, leaving us in silence.

Sarah stopped soon after entering the room. "Whoa," she said yet again. "I was expecting a smaller closet."

The only proof that the room had been used for storage - as far as I could tell - was that two walls - the one with the door, and the one to the right of the door - were covered in several shelves of various

heights and widths. It was, at my guess, about fifteen feet in width and length and half that in height, with rounded edges and absolutely no sharp corners. On the left wall, many of the shelves remained, but some had been removed, to make room for a rectangular, window-like screen, which showed what appeared to be a view of Erek's backyard. Underneath the "window" was a small, round chair, much like a bed a human would buy for their dog but much higher. Most of the floor was covered with a round, pale, multi-colored rug, which was soft under my hooves, but the lack of fibers made it impossible for me to mistake it for grass. Across the room, another rectangular "window" showed a view of Erek's frontyard. To our right, there was a larger, less round version of the chair, beside which was what looked like a folding storage compartment.

The only other things in the bare-looking room were the morphing cube on one of the shelves, and a Chee pushing down on the fabric of the larger of the pieces of furniture.

"Just like guests to show up early," the Chee said in a light, somewhat feminine tone. It turned around, smiling. "My name is Chee-Myani," it introduced itself. "Whatever it is you need, Casey-Sarah, you simply need to ask and I'll get it for you. Since I don't have a human life to live right now, I'm in charge of seeing that you are as comfortable as possible here."

"Thanks," Sarah said. "First, don't call me that. 'Sarah' will do fine. Second, something to eat would be nice, considering I haven't eaten since last night and am feeling kind of queasy at the moment. Third - though I don't expect you to simply give this to me, of course - it would be very nice to have a plan right about now."

A confused look crossed Chee-Myani's face. "Don't worry about it, Myani," Erek said. She shrugged a little and walked outside.

Sarah dropped the small dog on the larger of the pieces of furniture. "Now, to plan," she said, falling into a sitting position beside the dog. She rubbed between its ears distractedly; the dog wagged its tail with pleasure. "Still in need of a plan." She frowned suddenly, and a muscle in her face twitched. "I think Udrak's got something, but I'm not getting anything coherent." Her frown deepened. "Your calculations were off, Erek," she said. "He's got hours now. There's no way Udrak's going to last the night."

"He left you, went into Aximili, left Aximili, and returned to you," Erek said. "It takes energy for a Yeerk to enter and exit hosts - and Udrak didn't have that energy to spare. He's exhausted to the point of illness. His exhaustion is killing him."

"Great," Sarah muttered, standing up again. She removed her coat, throwing it on the smaller piece of furniture. The little dog curled in a ball on the bigger piece of furniture and closed its eyes. Sarah kicked off her shoes, then kicked them under the larger piece of furniture. "Hmm... feels good to get those off," she said. I could see her toes wiggle within the artificial skin she wore underneath her shoes. Humans call that sort of artificial skin "socks". She began pacing, back and forth, across the rug, her hands clasped behind her back, her expression intent. "Come on, talk sense," she muttered, but I doubt she was talking to anyone besides Udrak.

A Chee entered the room, carrying a tray. "Already it looks lived

in,"

the Chee - Chee-Myani - said, its somewhat feminine voice chiding. It put the tray of food on top of the storage compartment, then picked up Sarah's coat from the smaller piece of furniture.

"Leave it, I'll need it," Sarah said, her voice distracted. She stopped pacing, and shook her head. "Udrak keeps saying something about 'doppelganger'... it doesn't make any sense." She looked at me, as if I would understand.

Needless to say, I did not. 'Doppelganger'? I echoed. I did not know that word.

Sarah shrugged slightly. "I don't know what it means," she admitted. "I mean, I know what the word means. I just don't know what Udrak means by using it. Mainly it's something about me morphing..." She shook her head. "A doppelganger is a German myth... something about a person's soul being separate from their body, like a ghost... looks and acts like the person. A fake twin, usually an evil twin, that sort of thing." She shook her head again. "It's something about the two of us morphing." She looked at the morphing cube skeptically. "Is that the thing? The Escafil Device?"

Yes, I replied.

She frowned. "Looks simple enough." She turned her back to it, as if not looking at it would make it easier not to think about it. "Okay. Udrak wants me able to morph. He wants me to acquire... acquire. And be acquired. I... I don't..." She looked at me, her expression both confused and worried, when her eyes suddenly widened. She snapped her fingers. "I can't believe it," she said. "It's... wow." Then she frowned. "But he's right. It means I'll have to be able to morph." She looked at the Escafil Device again, and instead of skepticism, I was surprised to see fear. "I don't like that idea."

I was genuinely surprised. You do not wish to be able to morph?

"It's not that." She looked at me again. "Do you really trust me enough for that?"

Again I was surprised. It took me a moment to arrange my thoughts enough to answer. I do trust you, I said. I do not know about the others. They seem to respect you. Erek has spoken in your favor - yours, and Udrak's.

"But..." she prompted me.

But, I finished, I do not know if they would approve of me giving you the morphing technology without their agreement. I pawed at the floor. Tobias told me that everyone was in agreement that, should it come time to decide if you would become an Animorph, it had to be a unanimous

vote.

"'Animorph'?" Sarah echoed. "What's an 'Animorph'?"

It is what the others call themselves, I replied.

Sarah nodded slightly. "A good plan," she said. "But, with them captured, that does cause some problems, don't it. Hard to take a vote when five-sixths of the panel has to abstain."

Indeed, I agreed darkly.

"Then it seems it is up to you, Aximili," Chee-Myani spoke up.

I raised my tail a little, feeling confused and frightened as the full extent of what had happened suddenly hit me. I don't know what to do! I cried. I'm no prince!

"Well, you are now," Sarah snapped, her eyes narrowing. "It's up to you, Ax. I don't know how to work that thing, and personally I'd rather leave it where it is. But the others are in trouble, and as far as my life and my world is concerned they're the best hope for both. They're your friends, Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill! What would they want you to do!"

They would want me to save them so long as it didn't endanger myself! I said, my tone just as sharp.

"Don't contradict yourself!" Sarah replied harshly. "To save them, you have put yourself in danger for their welfare!" I noted, somewhere in the back of my mind, that her odd accent was returning. "Try again, Ax, 'cause that made no sense! An' make it quick, b'cause we don't have the time t'argue!"

I closed my main eyes, trying to get my thoughts in order. It didn't take me long to realize that they already were. I am not contradicting myself, I said, lowering my tail and straightening my shoulders. They would want me to try to save them, as long as I did not put myself in danger to do it.

"Okay," Sarah said, sighing. She rubbed her forehead with her fingertips. "Okay, if that's how it is." She moved her hand to the side, so that she could look at me without her hand being in the way. The corners of her mouth turned up. "But, if they were in your position... Jake, Rachel, Marco, Tobias, Cassie... what would one of them do?"

I smiled grimly. I had been thinking the same thing. They would realize that I would want the same... but attempt to save me, in spite of any risk to themselves.

"Which..." she prompted me.

My smile strengthened. Which is exactly what I shall do, I finished, with Udrak's plan.

She smiled back. "Okay," she said. She looked at Chee-Myani. "I'm going to need something skin-tight... Mia, was it?"

"Close enough," the Chee replied. It walked to the storage compartment, touching the third of the twelve tiers with the tip of one stubby finger. The short stack of shelves raised up, the top two shelves shifting backwards as the third one pulled up and forward, until it lay open right at Chee-Myani's waistlevel. "And that's already been taken care of." The Chee pulled something out of the

draw, and turned around to hold it out in front of them.

"Whoa," Sarah said, in a tone which I believe was meant to be complimentary.

The suit was in the general shape of a human's body, but flat, and without a head or hands. It had the same arm and leg configuration, and no tail whatsoever. A primitive locking device called a "zipper" held the front shut. It was mostly black, with teal stripes near the shoulders, neck, and on the thighs, with thin, purplish-pink lines accenting the teal markings. At the end of the legs appeared to be feet without toes, more like shoes than feet at all.

"Whoa," Sarah said again. "That's a wetsuit, isn't it?"

A... wetsuit? I echoed. It appeared perfectly dry - at least, it wasn't dripping.

"A primitive human device to keep the skin dry and warm in deep-sea swimming," Sarah said, holding her hand to her ear. She closed her eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath as Udrak came out of her ear. Once he was out, she held him in one hand as she crossed the room to take the "wetsuit" from the Chee. She held Udrak out toward me.

"Here," she said.

I looked down at Udrak suspiciously. What?

"You're going to need him," she said, her tone cold. "Hold him a minute and turn around, okay? I got to change." Hesitantly I held out my hand. Sarah grabbed it, putting Udrak in the palm of my hand, and walked away quickly, wasting no time.

I looked down at Udrak. There he was, just another Yeerk slug. I could so easily crush him in my hand, weak as it was compared to a human hand.

But something stopped me.

No, not something. Some_one_.

Udrak stopped me.

I remembered how desperate he had been - not to save himself, but Sarah. I am sorry for what we have done to you, he had said. I am sorry if what I ask puts you at risk. But... please. Don't let her... don't let them kill Sarah. You want to see a Controller beg? Fine. I'm begging. I'm beyond begging, I'm handing myself over. I'm bailing, leaving my host. I'm surrendering. You hear me? I surrender. I give up. I quit. Do what you want to me. I really don't care anymore, as long as you let...Sarah... live. At no time did he beg for his own life - only Sarah's.

I remembered what he had said of fear. Of being afraid. What was it he had been afraid of, again? Fear of Andalites, of the Council, of the officers, of death, of life, of war, of promotion, of demotion, of capture, of discovery, of torture, of what I've become, of everything and everyone.... all the fear. To live is to fear. And the one escape from fear is the most frightening possibility of

all._

--

"We ready, Aximili?"

I looked up, startled. Sarah's previous clothing had been thrown on the larger piece of furniture next to the small dog; she now wore the wetsuit, although its zipper was not completely closed; she left the part which sealed around her neck partially open. I saw that her feet fit well in the shoe-like "feet" of the wetsuit; remembering Marco's repetitive complaint of a lack of shoes, I smiled slightly at the thought of what he would think of Sarah's morphing outfit.

Yes, I replied, walking to the shelf with the Escafifl Device. I picked it up, holding it in one hand, Udrak in the other. I looked at both for a moment before turning. Sarah stood next to me, a look of concentration on her face. She frowned a little as I held the cube out to her. Place your hand on the side of the cube closest to you, I instructed....

CHAPTER 18

"Yahh!"

We looked at Sarah, surprised. What is it?

"The soles of these footsie-thingies aren't very thick," she muttered, standing on one leg and grabbing the other in her hand. She brushed at the bottom of her foot. "Ay... I thought I punctured my foot for sure. Ow."

It cannot be worse than your Dracon burns, we said.

"Those don't hurt anymore," she said, looking at me sharply. Then she stopped and looked at a dead tree right in our path.

Here we are, we said unnecessarily. Are you ready?

"As I'll ever be," she replied. "Good luck to us all. We'll need it."

We pressed our hand to the side of the tree. Immediately, another, far wider tree beside it shifted sideways, revealing a flat platform. After you, we said, indicating the platform with our hand. Sarah stepped onto the platform; we stepped on right after her. The platform quickly sunk into the ground, and the tree returned to its former position.

On the descent, we - I, Aximili - had the chance to think about the odd sensation I was feeling. I, not Sarah, had held Udrak to my ear this time. I had let him into my mind, willingly, opening myself to him.

The difference from before had been like the difference between humans and Andalites. Instead of Udrak's separate mind, I felt his mind merging with my own, could almost see where our common memories and experiences came together into one memory or experience from two viewpoints. In my mind, I found not one lifetime of memories, but three - Udrak's beginnings as a grub, to his loved

one's executions and the exact moment he realized that Esplin had chosen to accept what he himself found atrocious. I could see where my first memories began, and Sarah's as well, mine not too long before hers, and where our childhoods paralleled and where they had nothing in common. The difference, I found, was mostly in that she had two siblings, and that I, in comparison, had none, as Elfangor was already an aristh before I was even born. I saw where Sarah's life and Udrak's merged, where they stopped being two separate lives. I could see, so clearly, the memories of the three of us!

Sarah had been right.

It was not like being a puppet at all: it was like Udrak was an extension of myself.

Coherence came to his sporadic, pain-ridden, often unfinished thoughts. So I'm not the evil Yeerk anymore? he asked me.

No, I replied. No, you are no parasite.

He laughed at me. I'm still a Yeerk, Andalite filth, he sneered, but there was no hate to his silent voice. He was laughing at me, yes, but in a way that my human friends have laughed at me before. I'm the same one who used you to kill.

No, I said again. Now, you are me, and cannot do that now.

So you see at last, Aximili, he said. He seemed to sigh, to shudder, to... to fade. At last... you see. He seemed to spasm then, and I numbly felt the shock of pain that made him writhe within my mind. A muscle in our face twitched, but that was the only thing that revealed anything amiss. Sarah didn't even notice it.

The platform slowed to a stop; Sarah stepped off first, then we did. We walked down a short, dark corridor that was half-familiar, half-foreign. The reason was simple: Udrak remembered it, while I had never been there before. He knew where to go, so he moved my feet, while I helped him to keep him from making us trip, because he could barely think straight.

It is difficult to explain.

We exited the corridor into what turned out to be a very small, badly lit Yeerk pool. There was only one pier for the loading and unloading of hosts, and no cages in sight.

Of course.

This was a private Yeerk pool, for voluntary hosts only.

This was where Sarah had called the Hork-Bajir standing at her shoulder in case she should lose her balance-

Inwardly I smiled. She hadn't called him something very nice.

A Hork-Bajir guard, relaxed and half-asleep, suddenly snapped to attention. Seeing me, he bared his teeth and snarled out, "Andalite!"

Shut up, you worthless waste of biomatter, we snapped at them. I am

sub-Visser Sixty-One. Tell Visser Three I have a surprise for him.

The Hork-Bajir-Controller glared at us. "How do _fergn_ -"

Before he could finish the thought, our tailblade was at his throat. Do you wish to discuss it from the floor, or do you wish to do as I tell you? we asked, our tone partially harsh, partially sarcastic. We pulled our tailblade back slightly. With one final glare the Hork-Bajir Controller hurried off.

"Smooth," Sarah murmured. We said nothing in reply, but headed deeper into the small Yeerk pool, our hand against Sarah's back to keep her slightly ahead of us.

We saw the Hork-Bajir-Controller disappear around a tight corner, where a small opening led into a hidden alcove. Sarah nodded wordlessly: she, too, was certain that was where the others were. There was a sharp, _snap_ping sound, and Visser Three appeared without the guard.

Visser Three, leader of the Yeerk invasion of Earth. Visser Three, the only known Andalite-Controller. Visser Three, one of Udrak's many brothers. Visser Three, once known, long ago, as Esplin Nine-Four-Double-Six. Visser Three, murderer of Elfangor-Sirinial-Shamtul, and at least four Yeerks that Udrak had cared about whose names were lost in his inability to think correctly.

Neither of us had any true, good feelings toward Visser Three.

What is the meaning of this? Visser Three demanded, his tail arched high over his back. An Andalite walks in this Yeerk pool?

We laughed at him, and his shock and outrage. At ease, Esplin, we told him, still laughing. It does no one good if you cramp your tail like that. We both know this child has more skill in his tailblade than you've got in your entire tail, dear old Visser.

Visser Three glared at us with all four of his eyes. They widened to painful-looking proportions. Is it true? he said. Udrak Eight-eight-eight, are you truly in there?

How else do you think I could get here? we asked rudely. Do you think I sprouted roots and dug my way down?

Always the comedian, Visser Three said, his tone almost smug. Humans always fit you well, Udrak.

As Hork-Bajir always suited you, we returned. We arched our tail proudly and stood taller. How do you like my change of host, Visser? Jealous?

Visser Three laughed. Hardly! Of that young _child_? I much prefer this matured host. But I congratulate you on your capture, Udrak. This is a most fortuitous day: four new host bodies for my best lieutenants and two of the Andalite bandits captured - one already given to you, in fact: that makes things a great deal simpler.

Do not tell me you had already planned on giving me one of these

wondrous bodies? we asked, pretending to be flattered even though we felt equally sickened.

Who better than my most loyal brother? Visser Three smiled at us. The honest emotion in that smile was unnerving for me, infuriating for Udrak. You would never turn on me, Udrak. You know why? Because you have nothing to care for but me.

Ah, true to a point, we agreed. Always you fall short of the truth, Esplin. I've something else nowadays, I'm afraid. I have a special favor to ask.

Ask, he said, barely pausing, but we easily noted it.

This girl - my host, since coming here. We shifted our hand from Sarah's back to her shoulder. We ask that she remain free.

A muscle eased in Visser Three's face; the request was far less than he had assumed. We guessed that he had predicted that we would ask for a promise not to be taken from my body: that was what he would have asked for. You know I cannot do that, Udrak, Visser Three replied, sounding honestly saddened. We cannot have a free human working for us. You know how devious these creatures are.

My Sarah? Devious? we asked, sounding pained. Sarah looked at us with amusement. We looked back, smiling. How could my little Sarah be devious? She doesn't have a single thought in that beaten head of hers. What do you think I've done in seven years, Esplin - put her on air cushions? She does only as she's told, same as she's done for nearly four years now. There isn't a single shred of will in this husk. My dear old Visser, you know I tend not to exaggerate, and I am not when I say she's little more than a Taxxon without the hunger in there. Empty. There isn't even fear in there anymore. The blessing of getting them young, I suppose.

No will at all, Visser Three said, not sounding convinced. In fact,

he sounded downright contemptuous. It was no wonder - my allies and I had led to him discovering that such a thing was impossible - at least, by chemical means.

Sarah cannot swim, we told him, knowing it was a lie but did not reveal it in our voice. Turning to Sarah, we said, Sarah, walk into the Yeerk pool. She nodded politely, then walked forward. At the very brink we said, Stop. She put her left foot, held precariously over the side of the Yeerk pool, back next to her right, which hung halfway off the edge. We turned back to Visser Three. Should we tell her to walk again?

Visser Three looked at Sarah, perched so close to the edge of the Yeerk pool. That is unnecessary, he said at last. There is no point in harming her.

You are too kind, dear old Visser. Sarah, come back. Sarah stepped back from the edge, turned around, and came to stand in front of us again. What are these new hosts you've acquired? we asked, as if to make conversation.

Four young humans, Visser Three replied. They're unconscious in the

back room. Two male, two female.

Young humans? we said, sounding interested. Very young?

The Visser responded negatively. About half-grown. Why do you ask?

The Andalites here have been having contact with a few humans, we said, keeping our voice directed at the Visser. Very young, very impressionable humans. Less than ten Earth rotations in age. Three of them. That is how they know so much of human culture.

Ah! Visser Three crowed, not bothering to be silent. Of course! Younger humans would be less likely to fear Andalites than older ones,

strange as it seems. And they are more likely to be willing to cooperate. And less likely to deceive, he added. Then his tone darkened, became more focused. How many Andalites are on this planet, Udrak? he demanded, making no attempt to be polite about it.

We forced a dark scowl into our expression. Our worst fears are true, Visser Three, we said formally. The Andalites have a base here on this planet. I shall show it to you when convenient. Several hundred of them are posted here. Only the excessive Andalite pride has allowed them to underestimate us so much so far that we have been allowed to the amount of success we have had.

Visser Three cursed harshly. Those Andalite filth! he added for good measure, before swearing again.

No need to get yourself so upset, Esplin, we said, unable to keep a slight sneer from our voice. Surely you are prepared for such a consequence?

Not yet, he replied, before turning to us with a dark smile. But don't worry, Udrak. I've received the final confirmation: the othyb_ are on their way.

The othyb? we echoed, shocked and surprised. At least, Udrak was shocked and slightly surprised. I was surprised at Udrak's shock, and completely confused. "Othyb" is a word in Galard. It is not a kind word - its closest translation to the human language called English would be, "a malformed, vile creature of natural or unnatural origin." The closest word humans might have similar to othyb is "freak". How in a dark sun did you bribe the Council to let you play with those... those freaks?

It took no bribes, only conviction, Visser Three replied smugly.

You mean whoever has them now fouled up, and the Council wants to remove them from their present stations, we translated.

It is true that the former Visser Seven has been demoted to sub-Visser Four, Visser Three admitted, his tone still condescending, smug. That was also my doing.

Why are you so set on getting the _othyb_, Esplin?

Haven't you heard the news lately, Udrak? The only creatures within the Empire that have killed more Andalite filth than me are the _othyb_.

Othyb? I asked Udrak.

No one knows, he muttered sharply. Some sort of genetic mutant the Council got ahold of, very powerful, very deadly, near impossible to control. Esplin's desperate to get _them_. Watch yourself.

Visser Three was still gloating. I estimate that, with a few _othyb_ under my command, these annoying Andalites will be dealt with efficiently. That is sub-Visser Nineteen's specialty.

An sub-Visser? An unreliable creature like an _othyb_-Controller is a sub-Visser? What fool would choose a difficult host?

That remains to be seen, Visser Three replied. It also isn't certain how many I will be getting. It seems that Visser Two has had a few already and has prior claim on any not promised to me. I do not think I will be getting many, but a few should be enough.

It's unlike you, Esplin, to rely on anything so strongly besides yourself, we said. We fought to keep ourselves from smiling outwardly. Are the Andalites that much trouble for you? Not that you would ever admit to it, but I believe they are getting under your skin.

You are right, it is unlike me, he said, his gaze turning more dangerous, a silent warning we could not heed. The Andalites are less likely to suspect me of acting differently than I naturally do. I will not _trust_ these _othyb_, Udrak, I'm not foolish.

We never said you were, we replied, smiling slightly.

Visser Three seemed about to speak when he stopped. Simply... stopped. Slowly, he brought his eyestalks around to regard us with all four of his eyes. Udrak... he said, sounding confused, as if he wanted to say something but had nothing to say.

Yes? we replied innocently.

You... how you referred to yourself. You called yourself 'we'.

Of course. The Andalite and I. Neither of us consider you a fool. Nor does Sarah.

Udrak, you are far more difficult than you are worth. Speak plainly for once in your pathetic life.

Our smile strengthened. Udrak was barely holding on; I had to keep him focused, aware. We are, we said.

Visser Three's eyes narrowed. What sort of game is this, Udrak? he asked, but it wasn't a question. He knew now.

You want a game, my dear Visser? we said, drawing our tail forward. We'll give you a game. We shall call it, 'Choose Your Fate'. You win

if you can answer this question. It was time for the signal: Visser Three knew now, but the timing had to be perfect. He couldn't know who to aim for. The question is: which... is which? With that, we began to morph.

Our stalk eyes retracted quickly into our skull, and bronze hair sprouted in its place. We could feel the change in our eyes, as they shrunk to a smaller size and as they no doubt changed from green to a far browner color. Our tail began to recede.

At the same time, Sarah let out a groan, as if in pain. Her morphing suit and skin quickly turned blue. Her face distorted, as her nose crushed inward on itself and her mouth sealed before any other changes occurred in her lower face. Her legs suddenly snapped, the muscle tearing as the bones changed entirely, and fingerbones to two extra fingers sprouted through her hands.

Something was wrong. We knew, immediately, that something was definitely wrong.

Everything had gone to plan.

Everything... but that Sarah's morphing was going entirely wrong.

CHAPTER 19

We stared in horror - Udrak through my morphing eyes, me through the same eyes, and Visser Three with his main eyes and one stalk eye - as Sarah's morph continued. The blue-colored skin caught up with her leg bones, now almost sticks in comparison to what they had been, but there was still a definite lack of muscle between. There was a sharp crack as, quite suddenly, a half-formed Andalite tail burst out of her spine.

It looked very painful. There was probably only one reason Sarah was not screaming: she wasn't morphed enough to have thought-speech capabilities, but her mouth was gone.

Well, two reasons, then.

There was an odd, hollow sound, as two snake-like things appeared to be growing from her head, and as all her hair, in one great cloud, simply fell out of her scalp and fell to the floor. Her ears squirmed higher on her head. Her eye sockets grew larger slightly faster than her eyes, causing a very unpleasant sight until her eyes caught up with them. The nostrils of her nose - all that had not been pulled inward when it collapsed - deflated, leaving two slits in her face, three if you included the one through which her nose had vanished. Her jaw became less heavy as her need of it dissolved away. Finally, her spine shot back, and two spindly legs grew from it; her tail formed, then her back legs, and Sarah leaned heavily backwards on her sudden backside. Normally, when I morph from human to Andalite, my human legs become my back legs: in this case, Sarah's entire backside simply blew outward from her back. Lastly, her tailblade - our tailblade - cut its way through the flesh of her finished tail, glistening and sharp.

We were not even halfway morphed. We still had most of our lower body, although it had so greatly contracted that there was very

little of anything between our four legs, although it was black, not blue, and one too many fingers on each hand, and no mouth or nose. The nose and mouth came almost together, as if we were getting a beak, but did not come together in that way. Our extra fingers disappeared. Our forelegs began to weaken, and we reared up on our strengthening hind legs - although "reared up" isn't really the words to use, because we didn't go very far "up". Human feet in rubber "shoes" formed in place of our hind hooves, and our forelegs finally shriveled out of existence.

In spite of the strange, completely horrifying morph, Sarah was able to smile. Which of us is Udrak, dear old Visser? she sneered at him in my own voice. Which of us is the Andalite, which the girl? Even then, there's no advantage of which of us has the Yeerk within us.

The Andalite would never allow it! Visser Three snarled.

His tail swung toward Sarah almost too quickly for our now human eyes to follow. No! Udrak howled so loudly I was certain Visser Three and Sarah would have heard.

Sarah's reaction was completely by instinct: dodging backwards, out of range, she brought her tail to the other side of the Visser, slapping him in the side of the head with the side of her blade. Uh-uh, don't be hasty, she chided him. You have to guess first, dear Esplin. Which has who you want - the Andalite, or the girl? And which is the Andalite, which the girl?

Don't play with me, Udrak! Visser Three howled at us both.

Why not? Sarah asked in a quiet voice. You play with children, Visser Three. You play with a pathetic little race of primates without the slightest grace except their number, which in itself hurts you. You have to hide, to rely on other things than yourself, and inside that boils you. All you had was me. I was the only one you could trust. But you know what, Esplin? You were lying to yourself! Once you accepted that promotion, you lost me forever!

What promotion? he asked, obviously having no clue what she was talking about.

Sarah took a stab at Visser Three's face. He easily blocked it: after all, Sarah did not have my training in tailblade fighting. What do you think, Visser Three? she demanded. Or should I say, Sub-Visser Twelve? Or was it Seven at the time? Maybe when you were Visser Eighteen? Twelve? Nine? Five? When was it you killed Udrak Four-Nine-Four, Belryn Two, Iniss Five-Five-Three? What about Esplin Five-Nine? Where were you for them, Visser Three?

They were traitors! Visser Three roared.

You're the traitor! Sarah screamed back. What of the now sub-Visser Four, huh? What was it you did to them? You thought you had me, Visser, but all you have is your rank, vile rank! Be happy with it, Esplin, because one day it will be gone and you will have nothing.

This was not good. Sarah had no hope of defeating Visser Three. She was frightened from what had happened when she morphed - we did not blame her for that, but she was becoming too emotional. There had to be a way for us to even the odds between them.

Udrak suddenly began rattling off dates, facts, faces.

Of course.

"There was Udrak Four-Nine-Four when you were sub-Visser Twelve, when he refused to take an order from a sibling younger than him. Then Iniss Five-Five-Three, when you were sub-Visser Seven, and that was simply because you were in a bad mood. An accident, really. Belryn Two died because you wanted to be sure that the dismissal of Iniss' death wasn't just because it was an accident. Esplin Five-Nine died when you were Visser Nine, when you suspected her of sympathizing with her host."

Visser Three looked at us both, startled. It was no surprise: we both knew what Udrak did. Esplin had no concept of what it was to share with his host, and therefore did not understand what extents Yeerks can merge with them, at least mentally. Without that knowledge, he was at a loss of who to fight - the tailblade, or the current speaker.

Of course, I knew that Sarah had a better idea of the pain Udrak had at these memories. Mostly the pain I felt from him came from his starvation. All I could do was give facts. Sarah gave less detailed statistics, but she had the pain of it working to her advantage.

"You know what your stupidest mistake was, Esplin?" we asked him, our tone mocking. "You only kept that one stupid guard, that one to keep Alloran in line. You never suspected the only one you shared your secret little pool with would turn on you. What a pathetic, sad little fool you are, dear old Visser."

Visser Three backed away, giving ground. I know you, Udrak, he said at last. You don't want to kill me. You want a compromise.

Oh, you're wrong about that, Sarah snarled. We do want you dead - all three of us. It'd make things so much easier on us all, knowing that you'd be sent off before me. I certainly could rest easier.

"But I'm not you, Esplin," we said. "We will accept your compromise."

The children for your life, Sarah finished. This time.

The Visser wasn't in the position to argue. Sarah moved beyond him.

Two things happened at once: Visser Three lunged at me, and Sarah's tail swung at the Visser.

In the end, Visser Three sprawled dangerously close to the tiny pool, breathing deeply. A large bruise was already forming on his head, and because he had moved, a stalk eye had fallen into the pool without

him attached to it.

Let's go, Sarah said coldly. She headed into the back room. He _had_ to have called reinforcements.

If he did, we never met them.

Only one thing remained.

"Sarah," we spoke, as we headed away. The others, besides Tobias, had morphed to birds of prey, ready to escape. Tobias morphed to seagull, so that his injury would heal but he could still fly. Sarah and I had to demorph first.

She looked at us with my own eyes. What?

"It's time."

CHAPTER 20

Sarah's first morphing out was no better than her first morph.

The first thing that happened was a triple, deafening _crack_ as her front legs and tail simultaneously began folding in on themselves the same way her nose had in the first morph. Her stalk eyes shriveled quickly away, but the places where the stumps had been remained open far too long. Her eyes bulged as her eyesockets began to shrink, but then her eyes did too. Lips formed before her jaw changed, so that she had an outer mouth without a hollow behind it. Human feet exploded from delicate hooves. Her skin turned black in most places, and her hair began to grow back - covering her entire head for the first time, her wounds healed. Her eyes changed color, and her extra fingers retracted, one layer at a time.

The most startling thing, besides the terror factor of Sarah's morphing, was the speed. What should have taken over a minute in fact took less than half of one. She held out her hand to us, a mirror image of herself. "Quickly," she said. "I don't have a bird morph, anyway. I'll catch up to you."

We shook our head. "There's still a few minutes," we said, our voice exactly like her own. "We will demorph, and carry you to safety." Once demorphed, we held our hand out to her. She took it, using it to help boost herself onto our back. Udrak sort of chuckled at my discomfort. Don't... agree? he said, his thoughts mostly unclear gibberish. But his emotions were still intact: he meant that Sarah and I were different in that way. She didn't mind physical contact. Humans in general seem to like it. Andalites, however... we are not so inclined to physical contact. Generally, we avoid it, except in intimate circumstances. For instance, to show affection for another Andalite, an Andalite will brush the other's face with their palm. That is our way.

I have yet to discover what the human equivalent is.

We ran, but stumbled constantly; Udrak's disorganized thoughts made it hard for me to concentrate. All he thought now was, Run, run, run..., over and over again. He wanted distance. Safety. Sarah had to keep her grip tight around my chest, her knees squeezing my sides, to remain on my back. Her hair tickled my back.

My. My back. Not ours, my.

I stopped.

Yes, I. The connection between Udrak and I was suddenly broken. We were separate: I could not hear his thoughts. What came to me now - images, vague ideas - were random and confusing.

Then one thought finally came to me.

Now....

I felt him squirming from my ear, in jerks and spasms. It was an uncomfortable sensation. I held my hand to my ear, and felt the first tendrils tap my palm. Slowly, he inched outward, until, with a violent spasm, he finally fell into my hand. Quickly I gave him to Sarah. She held him in her hands for a moment, then held one hand to her ear.

I'll leave you two until you are ready, Sarah, I said, turning away.

"No! Please?" Sarah looked at me pleadingly. "Aximili, please. Don't-Don't go, please." The last of Udrak's body disappeared into her ear. "I don't want to be alone, please, don- ah! Ah! Ahhh!" She fell to her knees, and her hands flew up to grip the front portion of her head.

Quickly I returned to her side, and, folding my legs beneath me, I came down to her eye level. It will be all right, Sarah, I said. There is nothing to fear.

The stricken look of pain did not leave Sarah's face, and she did not move her hands, but I think she heard me, because she stopped muffling screams and fell silent. She remained completely still, almost not breathing, for a very long time. I remained in front of her, watching her, waiting.

I don't know exactly how long it took: I wasn't paying attention to the passing of time. Finally, for the last time, something gray protruded from Sarah's ear, and Udrak fell to the ground. Sarah suddenly leaned forward, barely moving her hands in time to catch herself. She took Udrak into her hands as tears appeared at the corners of her eyes. As we both watched, silent, Udrak shriveled away, shrinking until he disappeared from sight, becoming no more than a minuscule amount of colorless powder.

Sarah began to sob. I remember the vague thought, the last thing Udrak had really thought fully, of how different we were, humans and Andalites. Not just in how we feel about physical contact, but in general.

But he hadn't meant Sarah and me.

I realized that then.

Awkwardly, not sure what I was doing and acting on only what I had seen on the television in my scoop, I reached toward Sarah, touching her shoulder. Sarah.

She leaned into me, wrapping her arms around my neck. gingerly, I wrapped mine around her back. She cried into my shoulder for a very long time. Again, I did not measure exactly how long.

Sarah did eventually finish crying. We stayed where we were for a very long time. When finally we left, dawn was just beginning to lighten the sky.

"A new day," she said quietly.

I was startled: Sarah hadn't said a word since asking me to stay with her. Yes, I replied, uncertain what she was leading to.

"That was a very... a..." She looked at me, her eyes heavy with the lack of sleep, a slight smile on her face. "Thank you, Aximili," she said finally. "I knew I could count on you. I'm sorry if it made you uncomfortable."

I shook my head slightly. It does not matter.

The rest of the way, we simply walked. There was nothing else to say.

CHAPTER 21

Often, patterns form in life. Many people live by set schedules; others develop habits, good and bad, from repetition; still others use the same rituals and traditions as their ancestors. Many times, what happens to us seems to come full-circle; something that has happened before happens again, and sometimes you feel no less prepared. I do not know about my friends, but I, personally, did not feel prepared for what had to be done.

We had made a mistake with David. When we decided to make him one of us had been the first, but we could not have seen that. The second was making him one of us too quickly, before we knew much about him.

Making Sarah one of us hadn't been so much a decision as a desperate necessity, just as taking the blame for creating the Animorphs away from Elfangor had been. What was done was done; of course, now if it was a mistake, it wasn't someone else's fault, or everyone's - it was mine and mine alone. Time and preparation proved irrelevant, and Sarah proved to be much better under pressure than David had been.

But things had come full-circle since we had retrieved the Escafil Device. We had tried to make David one of us, and failed. Now we were putting that mistake behind us, and starting anew with Sarah.

There was a sense of ritual, of tradition, as I led Sarah to the same

clearing as where David had become an Animorph. Only a week before, Udrak had died; now, Sarah was much like she had been before, but remained different in a way that was not so much seen as felt. The others waited, unmorphed, with a cage with a barrier in the middle, dividing it in half. Poles were threaded through the cage; they had made it easier for my friends to carry it. On one side of the cage

was a large bald eagle; on the other side was a much smaller hawk, one that looked a great deal like the harrier I had acquired, but slightly larger, and brown instead of gray.

"Birds," Sarah said. "Hawks." She nodded grimly, serious because that was what the situation called for. Her hair was fine now, her shoulder healed, thank to morphing me. Her hair still had the snake-like wave; she still stood with a straight back and squared shoulders; she still appeared older than the others but not as much thanks to her slight disadvantage in height. But the change in Sarah wasn't one you could see anywhere but in her eyes: there, the hazy focus was gone; she no longer appeared distracted, or, as Marco put it, "spaced out". Now her green-brown eyes (the human word for it, I discovered later, is "hazel") seemed extremely focused and serious, haunted, tired, and old all at once. They were not the eyes of a young girl, or a Controller - they were eyes like Elfangor had had, filled with loss and strength but balanced by a strong and undying hope.

"These are our spy morphs," Prince Jake began to explain. Sarah crossed her arms, listening quietly. "They're also very useful in a quick fight." He regarded her quietly, then looked at Cassie.

Cassie picked up where he had left off. "The big one's a bald eagle, of course. It's fast, strong, and good for hauling things. The other's a northern harrier - more agile, smaller, gets altitude quicker."

"That's a harrier?" Marco sounded confused. "It doesn't look much like Ax's harrier."

"That's because male harrier are gray and females are brown," Cassie explained. "Ax's was a male, this one's female."

"So, which will it be, Sarah?" Prince Jake asked.

There was a long silence. It was a tense silence; this had been the turning point with David. When he was requested to morph the smaller hawk - in his case, a marlin - he refused, wanting the power of the larger raptor - his being a golden eagle. Now we knew better and were giving the new Animorph a choice, but the memory was still there. Her answer meant far more than it would have, in other circumstances.

"Hmm," Sarah said, frowning a little. "They've both their strengths - and their weaknesses." Her frowned deepened slightly. "Aximili," she said at last, "is there any known limit to how many morphs someone can acquire?"

I was startled. The others seemed as much ill at ease with her lack of an answer. I am unaware of such a limit, I replied.

She looked at me as I spoke, then looked back to the cage, seemingly unaware than everyone else was staring at her. Suddenly she shrugged. "Does anyone have a problem with me acquiring both?"

There was a new sort of silence. Instead of being like a stretching _fulnalf_ tree branch pulled taut, it was almost as if someone had stretched such a branch and suddenly let it go in our faces.

Marco was the first to break the silence. He laughed. It was a relieved laughter, not the loud laugh he uses when laughing at his own jokes.

Rachel was smiling, also relieved. "I don't think that's a problem."

Suddenly, the tension was gone. Cassie was grinning as she began to unlatch the cage.

In fact, the only one who didn't seem relieved was Sarah. She didn't move - she just stood beside me, arms crossed. Is something wrong? I asked her privately.

She scowled. "Yes, Aximili, you're right. Something is wrong." The others stopped smiling. "You guys have expressions so tight that if I tossed quarters at your faces I'd have to duck to avoid the ricochet. Don't treat me like an idiot."

"What do you mean, Sarah?" Cassie asked, her tone soft.

Sarah's serious gaze focused on Cassie for a moment before looking at the rest of us, one by one. It is something she does often, to make sure she has everyone's attention. "Udrak acquired Aximili as a host," she said finally, "twice. Don't think I don't know about David." She sighed, shaking her head. "I know what you must be thinking - 'she's nothing like him, but what if we're wrong again?' I know that's what I'd be wondering. But, the simple truth is, I am like David."

We were all silent at that.

"I've lost everything," Sarah went on, "my family, my home, everything about the life I once knew. Gone. My home is for sale, my family eradicated, my very existence erased."

"Eradicated?" Rachel cried.

Sarah's expression darkened. "Udrak killed my mother and her accomplices," she explained. "My father and sister brought you to Visser Three. When I and Ax and Udrak completely had him beat, betrayed him - do you think Visser Three would sit with that stewing in him? He'd take out his anger on the closest possible target. There's no way Dad or Kelly could survive what he'd devise for their Controllers. Besides, since I'm out, they won't let Kelly live, because she could help me by cutting her hair, and then they couldn't tell us apart. They can't risk that. And Matt—" She choked here, but managed to finish in an even voice, "-I warned him, but it's only a matter of time before they catch him."

"We're sorry," Marco said, his tone sympathetic and blunt at the same time, "but there's nothing we can do about that, Sarah. This is war, and we're not exactly the winning side." Then he grinned. "We're the underdogs - literally."

Rachel groaned. "You already used that one this week, Marco."

"Perhaps David didn't understand that," Sarah said quietly, "not like I do. David didn't understand the full concept of war, of loss."

That's what destroyed him in the end." Then she smiled. "He probably didn't realize how lucky he was."

We all just stared at her.

Sarah grinned, putting one arm around my waist, the other across Cassie's shoulders. "I know this is straight out of some really nasty, sappy movie, but.... when I lost one family, I got a new one." She laughed. "Even if they're an alien, a hawk, four kids who remind me way too much of my cousins, and a ton of dog-bots."

"Yeah, I'm sure they mentioned 'dog-bots' in 'Casablanca', " Marco said.

"Hey! I like that movie," Cassie retorted.

Sarah smiled at Jake and Rachel. "See what I mean?" Then the smile was gone, to be replaced by the serious, wise expression she wore more often than she did not, now. She walked forward a step and, kneeling down, carefully opened the cage. Reaching in, she touched the harrier first, then the eagle. She smiled again, but this time it was a small, knowing smile. It was the smile from so long - and yet not so long - ago, when a young girl and her Yeerk protector met a young, confused Andalite and smiled a smile that said they knew far more than their acquaintance ever could. But there was a sadness there, now - a quiet, understated something I'd only seen in Elfangor's smile, every once in a while.

It was no longer the small smile of someone who knew far more than anyone else. It was the smile of one who knew far more than they would wish on their greatest enemy.

Marco walked up to Sarah as she stood up. he held out his hand.
"Welcome to the Animorphs, new kid."

> Sarah shook his hand. "Thank you, old kid," she replied in a completely serious voice, although I suspected that her answer was meant to be humorous, judging from the oxymoronic use of the word "old" to describe the noun "kid".<p>

Marco then turned slightly, to face Cassie, his expression stern. "No MMM-Bop."

A confused look crossed Sarah's face, before she shrugged and shook her head, smiling a patient smile. "I'm not going to ask," she said finally. "I'm just not going to ask."

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To be continued in part two, The Farewellâ€|

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End
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